the still point

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PROFILES/INTERVIEWS

Babe the blue OX

Halcion

REVIEWS

Tori Amos

Polvo

LIVE

Ruby

Sleater-Kinney

from the editor

history

I've been writing *the still point* since 1982; its earlier incarnation lasted for 77 roughly bimonthly issues (the last one appearing early this year), written for ALPS, an apa (amateur press association: kind of a paper version of an Internet mailing list) comprised of science fiction fans who were also music fans.

In the last two years, I have been going to a lot of rock shows in small New York clubs, and was thus drawn out of a long fallow period where I hadn't paid much attention to current popular music. I got excellent response to *the still point* from musicians, labels, and local music fans, and the inevitable next step seemed to be to take the *still point* to the next level.

manifesto

I intend to cover live music in New York rock'n'roll clubs, a few selected shows in other cities, as well as associated recorded music. In a quarter century of listening to, thinking about, and writing about current popular music, I have found it to be true (and never truer than right now) that there is always more good music out there than one can possibly absorb, if one knows where to find it; and I hope to spread the word about what I have found.

philosophy

What does the title mean? I hear the Voice from the Audience say. The phrase comes from T.S. Eliot's poetic masterpiece *Four Quartets*, where it designates that peak human experience ("the moment in and out of time") when—however briefly—we feel divorced from our bodies, our consciousness of self suspended, in a state of ecstasy, either mental (meditation) or physical (cf. whirling dervishes). That's the reason for the phrase "sex and drugs and rock'n'roll": all of those activities can produce that experience. As Eliot says, "Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance." Even more to the point: "you are the music / While the music lasts." That's the still point.

strategy

A word on my angle of gaze: I focus on musical texture and architecture, and while I won't deny that there is a narrowness to that angle, I apply it to a relatively wide spectrum of music, from current guitar pop to folk to avant-garde jazz to quite forbidding contemporary classical compositions.

Some may find my approach relentlessly technical; and it is. But believe me, I'm not quite as technically informed as a casual glance might suppose, and I make an effort to keep technical language to a minimum. But still, it's the actual nuts and bolts of the music that most engage my attention.

I plead guilty to slighting lyrics to the point, often, of ignoring them; but as I feel that the preponderance of rock criticism—ever—overemphasizes lyrics, I feel no need to apologize for my compensating bias.

You'll find little or none of the overarching cultural critique that seems so de rigueur in most pop music writing: I'm not interested, for example, in discussing Sleater-Kinney from a gender perspective (as "women in rock"), nor from a political perspective (as "riot grrls") nor from a narrowly genre perspective (as "punk"); I prefer to consider them simply as rapidly-developing musicians already of extraordinary interest, as creators of memorable musical experiences.

this issue

I intended for this issue to appear much earlier than it has turned out to; it covers musical events from January through April of 1996. Though most of the material was be written by me, a few pieces were written by contributors (clearly indicated in the headnotes—and I hereby tender my thanks to them). I'll also use this space to thank my managing editor (collaborator would be better), Pete Lutjen, whose patience, good design sense, and willingness to deal with the vagaries of my writing schedule is greatly appreciated.

I wish this issue had been better balanced; the Halcion interview turned out long, as did the section of live reviews, and the record reviews turned out shorter than I intended. Not to mention that I had prepared a number of classical reviews that there turned out to be no room for.

future issues

My hope is that *the still point* will appear quarterly, and that the second issue will appear before the end of 1996. I don't know for sure at this time what the features will be, but I have plenty in mind.

That next issue will feature reports on both the Macintosh Festival and the CMJ Festival, as well as more CD reviews (including classical). There will also be a letter column, so let me know your thoughts.

I will be using a few contributors; if anyone reading this is interested, feel free to inquire—please don't simply submit.

contributors

Meredith Tarr has been programmer for "Champagne Jam" on WESU-FM in Middletown, Connecticut; several of her articles have appeared in the Tori Amos fanzine *Really Deep Thoughts*. She lives in the wilds of New Jersey.

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Babe the blue OX

"Babe the blue OX...rocks."

That's the first sentence I ever wrote about what was to become my favorite band after the first time I saw them, on a most serendipitous April Fool's Day in 1994. Since then I have seen as many of their local shows I possibly could, and written about them at every opportunity: for my money they are not only the best live band I've seen in New York, they're one of the best live bands I've ever seen.

And it's not only me; I remember a surprised shout of "You guys *kick ass*," clearly from a fan of another band on the Wetlands bill that night, and have had the pleasure of successfully introducing a number of friends to their onstage prowess. Though similarities to Primus and Captain Beefheart have led them to be dubbed, not entirely unfairly, as "art rock," there's nothing cerebral about them: it's their sheer ferocity—and fun—that is the most salient quality of their music. And with their major-label debut *People* (all their album titles come from Barbra Streisand albums!) now in the stores, they stand on the brink of wider recognition.

"We've been playing out now for five years," said bassist Rose Thomson when I spoke to her a few months ago. "And Tim and I had a band called The Action Verbs in college even three years before that." She and Tim were "totally best friends" at Brown, and they knew Hanna—who didn't play drums yet—even though she was a year ahead of them. "One year we all hung out and went dancing on Funk Night and listened to Prince." They were also friends with Lisa Loeb and Liz Mitchell (now of Ida), who sang as an acoustic duo. "Ohmigod, they were *huge* on campus."

Tim also formed a band called Dolores with Sasha Frere-Jones, now with Ui, and moved to New York with the intention of continuing the band. (Two Dolores tracks appear on a 1991 compilation of Knitting Factory bands called *Thirsty Ears*.)

After graduation Rose got a call from Hanna, whom she hadn't heard from in a year, saying she was moving to New York and had heard Rose was, too, and did she need a roommate? "Hanna had started to play drums, we built a practice space in the attic, Tim started coming over..." Though Tim and Rose tried some other drummers—including Clem Waldman, currently of Ui, who has also played with Halcion—they ended up really clicking with Hanna, who had gotten really good really fast. "She's got more technique than most drummers at this point; she's progressing all the time, picking up a lot of African and Latin things." Hanna, says Rose, just laughs when people ask her if she's self-taught (she in fact studied piano and violin in younger days), but Rose (whose first instrument was piano) finds it more bothersome; there's a bit of a sexist assumption, she feels, that women musicians are "noble savages." She is self-taught on the bass, however. "I did get a book on thumb-slapping." Her technique is most impressive; much of the time she plays fretless bass, which (like violin) is much harder to master than a fretted instrument, and she is a deft hand with harmonics. She cites Bill Laswell's striking string-bending as an influence.

I've compared Tim to Pete Townshend in the sense that both are first-rate songwriters and outstanding rhythm guitarists in a context where guitar virtuosity is not to the point; and Babe the blue OX, like Led Zeppelin and the Who an instrumental trio, has a similar ability to project a really huge sound.

Rose reveals that all three band members are in fact drummers: "Tim's first instrument was drums; I played percussion in an orchestra, fifth grade through high school." Which explains their frightening rhythmic accuracy.

The band was originally known as B.O.X. (hence the "eponymous" title of their first album); they added the periods because there was another band called Box. After they had released their first single under that name, they discovered a hip-hop band that had both the name and the periods, which led to changing their name to Babe the blue OX (note the odd capitalization that preserves, behind a mask as it were, the original band name).

BABE THE BLUE OX: *People*
(BMG [RCA] RADV 66844-2)

The two full albums and EP that Babe the blue OX previously put out on Homestead were all strong CDs, but none of them quite conveyed the volcanic power of their live show. So I expected nothing different from their major label debut, and thus dodged disappointment.

There is a split in their oeuvre between the ballads, with their little bit of folk, little bit of country, little bit of pop (whose pinging harmonics and ringing arpeggios are well-served by the new album's clear production), and the grinding, bluesy numbers that dominated the earlier recordings. They open the album with one of the latter, "Can't Stand Up," which like "Hazmats" (their song which got chosen as the single from the *Red Hot + Bothered* compilation) makes a good first taste of their style: the low rumbling swampy unison bass (Rose Thomson) and guitar (Tim Thomas) riff which the syncopated drum part (Hanna Fox) fits hand in glove—the sense of band-as-single-instrument; the dynamic swells and fades, including the swell to the brief rousing V-IV slide guitar chorus; Tim's post-Beefheart growling vocals; Rose's small sweet voice which nonetheless cuts into Tim's blare to make up their offangle harmonies; the relentless energy of the whole, right up to the on-a-dime cutoff.

And "Stand By Your Man" (not the one you're thinking of)—the first single—is one of the former. Here Tim's voice is smoother and folkier; he alternates the lead with Rose. It's a brisk but sweet ballad

which like "Can't Stand Up" peaks in an intense harmony chorus. The bass-drum ending is particularly nicely calculated. Though it's a really good song, I worry that it will give novice listeners the wrong idea about (what I think of as) their usual style.

"Rube Goldberg," their best song in that usual style, turns up next on the album, just to prove they aren't messing around. I'll save that best for last.

The other ballads on the album are also very fine. "Breathe" has a particularly beautiful dreamy verse, a very active bass part against guitar arpeggios, and an impressively urgent chorus. The bassline is even more fascinating in Rose's "Resumé" (Tim writes and sings most of the lyrics, but not this time), which is pitched to the sotto voce where her singing is the most effective. It's a lovely piece. "I'm Wrong" starts out similarly, pretending to move at a swifter clip in the verses, then halving the beat for another loud keening chorus. The album finale "Memphis" has terrific interplay between the guitar and bass (particularly the multiple unison harmonics), and even generates a little drive in its bridge before ending on the harmonics.

"Beat You To It" accomplishes the impressive feat of combining both their styles into one song: it has the ballads' folkier chords and warmer vocals (and just a touch of sweetening strings) over an irresistible ticktock syncopated exuberant rhythm. "Shunpiking" (which is the one song completely new to me on the CD, since they've never performed it live) does a very similar thing, but its structure is more complicated and there's a stronger contrast between the quiet chiming guitar in the verse and the slashing, chittering guitar in the chorus.

But much as I enjoy and appreciate the ballads (and I do), it's the nastier-sounding ones that are closest to my heart. "Fuck This Song" is short, noisy and driving,

That first album (1993) was recorded almost furtively, in bits and pieces late at night after Ramones recording sessions; Tim has been quoted as finding the result "scattered and uncontrolled." Though Rose acknowledges it would have been stronger if the recording quality had been better, at this late date she's pleased with the result: "Where did it come from?" Fans (like myself; I think it's their most consistent album) remember it fondly: "Some people like 'Chicken Head Bone Sucker' as their favorite song ever." They still play the raveup rock-'n'roll song "Gymkhana" as an encore, but have never been able to make my own favorite, "Snicker," work: the groove is too slow, Rose claims, for them to get it down.

When they were asked to contribute to Grass Records' Frank Sinatra tribute album *Chairman of the Board*, they chose to do "The Lady Is a Tramp." Tim brought the sheet music into rehearsal, read off the chords, and it happened really fast, in one of those memorable collaborative moments. "It was so much fun. I loved it. Getting those yelling high notes for me is hard to pull off live, though." It's an inspired performance; they make it so dissonant and raucous that it cracks me up every time I hear it.

Also in 1993 they released an EP *Je m'appelle Babe*, which contains "Tatoos," a song in 7/4 (except for the pivoting measure in 5/4) that is one of their masterpieces, and the piercingly lyrical Rose song "Agent 6950," which they still occasionally do live.

Color Me Babe followed in 1994 with their Chili-Peppers-meets-Crimson masterwork "Health," their 2x4-to-the-head setcloser "Ego Pimps," and "King of the Rain," a lovely folkish song that is a harbinger of the ballady songs more prevalent on the new album.

Tim in fact writes a lot of "pretty songs," as Rose calls them, "of the Nick Drake variety. He went through six months where he was only interested in pretty songs. It was hard for Hanna, she didn't understand. And it's hard for us to play pretty songs live. It's better to play "Ego Pimps" and get the audience going." (They did do a few of them at an "unplugged" concert last year, "which was more of a Tim Thomas show than a Babe the blue OX show.") Tim was quoted once as contemplating a solo album of them, but apparently doesn't plan as of now to do it anytime soon.

He does, however, have a new side band with Dan Littleton of Ida and Austin Hughes of Very Pleasant Neighbor to play *guy* songs (all three work with women in their regular bands), hard-driving stuff of a kind Rose is not interested in playing. "And I rarely ever say that. They don't have a name yet but they were calling it Testosterone. They'll have a show soon. They say they'll only have shows on national holidays."

They also rescued the athletically ponderous "Elephant" from their very first single for *Color Me Babe*, and Rose allows as how they might at some point revive the flip side "There's Always Room for One More, Honey." "I think it's a fine song." But she pointed out that they have a lot of unrecorded songs at this point; "Hazmats," which they gave to the Red Hot organization, may not appear on one of their own albums, at least until some more time has passed.

After three CDs they had reached a crossroads; and choosing not to re-up with Homestead, they instead accepted an offer from RCA. Though one often hears horror stories about major-label signings, and though RCA does not have a strong track record with "alternative" acts, the band seems very pleased with the deal so far; they actually feel that they have *more* musical freedom, to record their new album the way they wanted to, with a producer of their choice, in a leisurely fashion (rather than having to rush under budget constraints), and with the mix of material they preferred. RCA brass, in fact, were surprised at how "pop" the album is. But they have experienced little or no pressure to change their style.

So are they in fact changing their style?

"It goes back and forth—we still do some really weirdass stuff. Recently Tim needed another section to a strange song we were working on, which he just had in his head; he'd been figuring it might use the whole twelve-tone scale. Hanna started playing a beat on the drums, and then I started doing some part"—she sings a really odd riff—"but I definitely had a tonal center going that other people could easily pick up on." (It's quite characteristic of their songs to have extraordinary dissonance that is firmly grounded, either rhythmically or harmonically.)

Writing songs happens in different ways: Tim tends to bring songs in, but often needs help finishing them; sometimes lyrics are completed, sometimes he has "stanzas and stanzas and stanzas and he's got to cut it down. Maybe he'll just have a loose structure and a few parts. There's a lot of other ways after that." Some songs have developed from

rehearsal improvisations. Each member gets final say on those sections or those songs they contribute; "some songs no one gets a final say."

"Rube Goldberg" was put together more collaboratively. "It's is an example of one of those transformations that came in as one thing and turned into something else. That one as I remember, Tim had the basic part that starts the song; the funky middle part we added later. In rehearsals Tim started changing the structure a lot; the place where it totally builds we both kind of worked on together, I think. I added the harmony without asking."

The line "I believe in miracles"—"definitely a reference" to Hot Chocolate's "You Sexy Thing," though the context is really different—cost them a "sampling" fee; it's so integral (it's how the song ends) that they couldn't possibly leave it out that late in the day.

To my *ad nauseum* plea that they should record a live album, Rose rebuts that they did record a show once, and though the instruments sounded great, "the singing was abysmal." It's famously difficult to hear oneself and stay on pitch in the din and distortion of a live performance, I acknowledged, but look at Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's *Four-Way Street*, where the vocals are horrible but it's still a fine live record. I don't think I convinced her.

The video they made for "Hazmats" got some airplay on smaller cable music programs; Rose says that people at shows in other cities talk about seeing it—and it was in fact #1 two weeks in a row on one of them. More recently they've made a video for "Stand By Your Man," the single from *People*.

Their tentative plan is to record a new album in the spring; they have a lot of touring scheduled for the fall. Take my word for it and catch them if you can.

Discography

"There's Always Room for One More, Honey" b/w "Elephant"
(Stamp ST 6557, 1991)
[7" vinyl single]

[B.O.X.] **(Homestead HMS194-2, 1993)**

Je m'appelle Babe **(Homestead HMS211-2, 1993) [EP]**

Color Me Babe
(Homestead HMS217-2, 1994)

People **(RCA RADV 66844-2, 1996)**

building quickly to a cathartic scream. "Family Picnic" starts with another of their inexhaustible store of funky licks which simmers along very nicely as though it could be the whole song, but twice it is swept aside by a bridge/coda, three increasingly sledgehammer riffs (with paroxysmic muffled-string transitions) separated by strident wordless choruses. And "Just Checking" is a throwback to their earliest songs: played on two basses (no guitar), it has the choppiest, most grating, most dissonant riff on the album, yelling for vocals, and seems intent on pounding the listener into a powder. I love every minute of it.

But "Rube Goldberg" is their best song. I can hardly express how wonderful it is to finally (after two years of seeing them perform it live) have a recording (made safe for home consumption) I can play...*anytime I want*.. It's not (could hardly be) as overwhelming as the live version, but it's quite, quite satisfying.

It begins with a simple little major-key riff with an insanely catchy rhythm on the guitar; spare single-note bass and a kind of military tattoo on drums join in. All three instruments break up the rhythm with crazy fills and emphasis on the backbeat (and here in the studio they also add pinging, whirring toys to increase the controlled chaos), which only carries the listener away even more; it's exactly the musical equivalent of a jerrybuilt rattletrap machine.

The chorus is smoother, more regular in rhythm, and relaxed; it ends in a cop of the "I believe in miracles" line from Hot Chocolate's "You Sexy Thing."

Which releases suddenly into the middle section, where the main riff becomes more ominous, more obsessive (minor key), beginning to build tension; a version of the chorus, no longer relaxed, its steady rhythm increasing the tension, is the transition to yet another version of the main riff, which is loud and fanfarelike (major again), but astonishingly winds the tension tighter and tighter and tighter (three times through its sequence) until it is very nearly (but pleasurably) unbearable...

...finally releasing into the return of the original riff, the texture exploded into a zillion pieces, screaming, sliding bass, crazily strummed guitar, drum licks all over the place...a titanic catharsis. And it all drops to a whisper dead on the beat for one last calming chorus, and it's over.

When I discovered that the whole song lasts less than four minutes, I was amazed; it's such an eventful piece, it sounds so huge and so complex, it creates (as do all the best songs) its own little timeless world while it lasts, that I would have believed it much longer.

Trying to account for the awesome power of the song, it occurred to me that one way to look at it is that it's not in pop-style AABA form, but in something resembling classical sonata form. Consider that bouncy opening as the first theme; the quiet, more relaxed "chorus" as the second theme; the long, tension-building middle as a downright Beethovenlike development section; and the convulsive return to the verse as the (slightly altered) recapitulation.

Let me put it this way: were the rest of the album quite mediocre (which it most certainly is not), "Rube Goldberg" is so great a song that its presence alone would make this album worth owning.

Summing up: any new listener with sympathy to their style should find *People* to be a welcome introduction to the Babe the blue OX output. Still, still, still...reluctantly, I have to reiterate. Babe the blue OX makes excellent CDs—and this is no exception: it's their longest, most stylistically varied, has their masterpiece, so maybe it's their best, etc. etc.—but posterity demands a live album.

HALCION

Halcion is my other favorite New York band; I discovered them on that same serendipitous April Fool's Day bill in 1994 when I first went to see Babe the blue OX: I arrived early, part-way through a set by this band I'd never heard of called Halcion, and found that they were pretty interesting, too. And the rest is history: I have missed very few of their local shows since.

This spring, not long after the CD release party for their first album Lemongrass, *I sat down in an Indian restaurant on 6th Street with guitarists Dorit Chrysler (DC) and Chad Swanberg (CS) and new bassist Jeffrey Witte (JW); drummer Jon Flack was unable to join us. (My questions are labeled SP.) I will note that Dorit, Chad, and I are all inveterate interrupters, and spoiling* audio verité *I have had to unravel some very tangled skeins of crosstalk.*

SP: So tell me the story of how the band got together.
DC: I put an ad into the *New York Press*.
CS: She claimed she was looking for *girl* musicians.
DC: I was already in New York for a few years, and the main determination was to find people to make music with, and Chad responded to my "looking for girls" ad...
CS: I don't believe that the one I responded to was "looking for girls." If it had been...
DC: ...and I thought, "This guy sounds very strange." He kind of mumbled something about what he wanted to do was a mixture between Debussy and—what was the second thing?—Wagner, and it was "uh-*huh*, very interesting." At that time I was playing with a person, he was playing guitar and I was playing guitar. So Chad came and jammed with us, and he was playing bass and intimidating the other friend of mine a lot. Then I went to Florence, and when I got back I called Chad, because somehow I got the sense that he was very talented, and I wanted to [play] a little bit with him. And I snatched him away for a weekend in the country, and I showed him my fractures of songs. Actually, I played "Carrie" to him. We started to work together on a very loose basis first...
CS: We played with a couple people...
DC: ...we had many reincarnations, but Chad and I are the founding members, I found him through an ad, and we've been playing and working together and fighting since then, and that was since three and a half years ago.
SP: So "Carrie" was the first song you had written that was kind of a Halcion song, in a sense?
CS: No, "Lemongrass" was; when I first met Dorit that she had "Lemongrass" pretty much all finished. It had the verse and the chorus...
DC: "Lemongrass" was one of the first songs we worked on; that was an old song. And "Carrie" was just about going through my mind when I met this guy [Chad].
SP: How much of it did you have when you started working on it?
DC: Pretty much all the parts. Chad wrote his guitar parts...
SP: The guitar parts are lead parts, of his...
DC: Yes, but the guitar parts I'm playing, the chord progressions and the structure, was pretty much exactly the way it is.
CS: There are a couple of things that I put into it, but they're not *root* notes—all of the root notes were fully there. You know when the intro is finished and the guitars come in?
SP: The C and E minor part.
CS: Yes. The ascending thing is something that I wrote.
SP: Right, the ascending line on the C chord.
CS: C, D, E, F#—that thing.
SP: Were you [Dorit] playing in bands in Austria before you came over?
DC: Yes, I had a couple of bands. Some of them were known in Austria, but it's a very small country. They were not known for being great bands, it might have been, "oh, there's one of the few women that has a band." The last project carried my name, which is a mistake that I will never ever make again in my life.
SP: Your last name, originally, was Kreisler?
DC: Yeah, you know the real version. Well, I Americanized it when I was seventeen, before I came here, and I found out later that in the 1920s some of my relatives from the Kreisler clan had emigrated to America and had done the same thing, so it's something that's been in the family for generations.
SP: Well, it's easier for Americans to pronounce that way, I guess.
DC: Yeah. I like the swing of the American version.
SP: It sounds different to you? Oh, the way Americans pronounce it.
DC: It's just swingier, a bit more thick-sounding.
SP: Chad, you're from New Hampshire?
CS: Yep. Grew up in Keane. Pretty small town, not extremely small, small to mid-size.
DC: We all actually had the pleasure at the Northampton Festival, Chad hosted us in his parental house, the whole band. So that was very nice.
SP: So how long have you been in New York?
CS: I've been in New York for eight years, actually. I came to New York because it seemed like the only place on the East Coast that you could do music. I mean pretty seriously. There's Boston, but everybody knows that in Boston there's only a couple places to play. I'd spent some time in Boston, and I knew people in New York, so it seemed a good thing to go to New York.
SP: [to Dorit] You were doing some kind of performing when you were very small?
DC: Yes, I was doing radio commercials, I was actually yodeling. That's a very common thing to do in my country. And then I was singing in the opera when I was a little girl, and then I got too tall for the chorus and—it's something that usually happens to boys—my voice suddenly dropped, and I was very upset. And then I had my first band, it was a new wave band, which was what was going on, the Neue Deutsche Welle, when I was fourteen or fifteen, We applied at the local band competition, three years in a row. We lost twice. There were a lot of bands, and twice we became the absolute last band...
CS: What was the band called?
DC: The band was called Contagon, which was an infamous prescription pill that was prescribed to pregnant women in the 50s and 60s, and then their children were misformed. We had a punk attitude, and being fifteen, we wanted to be in bad taste. We thought it was funny, but I kind of don't think that any more.
SP: So from one drug to another, huh?
DC: I guess!
CS: I had a band called 100 Sleeping Pills once. So we've always been into drugs.
SP: So have you been in a lot of bands, then?
CS: I think so, yeah. I think I've been in quite a few bands.

HALCION: *Lemongrass* (Twitcher Records TW004)

I've been waiting two years for this album to come out, and I'm at least half as excited as the band themselves must be.

It's structured rather like a Halcion live set (which gives it a comforting familiarity to me), opening, as do many of their sets, with "Crime," a good first taste of their style. One guitar sets up a quiet percolating pulse, while the other runs an uneasy chromatic line over top; whispery vocals sing the first verse. There's an expectant quality, like the calm before a storm; and indeed it is suddenly interrupted by four bars of bonecrushingly heavy tritone chords—and then simmers down again. It's a strong example of the common quiet/loud strategy (faintly reminiscent of the similar ominous pulse/slashing chords of Peter Green's "The Green Manalishi" from early Fleetwood Mac). After the second verse, a different interruption, this one more driving with a chromatic tail, also cuts off to leave the pulse in control. The third verse more conventionally leads to a smoother major-key chorus. The first interruption then returns for a more extended visit, functioning as an instrumental bridge (with a touch of solo guitar over top). Back for one last verse and the chorus again, then the second interruption also returns to form the coda; its chromatic tail gets extended to a really messy random flailing ending (a venerable institution, cf. King Crimson's "21st Century Schizoid Man," but not one I'm fond of). So a really curious structure: four parts, a quiet one alternating with three loud ones, in a pattern

(continued on next page)

SP: Any of them recorded?
CS: Oh, we recorded a lot, but...
SP: I mean released recordings.
CS: ...not a lot of the stuff came out. I was in a succession of differently-named bands in the 80s that had similar lineups. This one guy that I was working with in the New Hampshire/southern Maine area was really a very talented guy ; his name is Bill Sirocco. Now he's become the great guru of analog synthesizers, actually; he's one of the few people who maintains and repairs stuff for the techno crowd; he'll fix your 808s, 303s, 909s, and R2600s and stuff. But I did music with him for many years. We got offers for deals, and negotiated them, and then found that, you know...
SP: What is your connection with Excello [Studio], exactly? I've never really gotten that clear.
CS: I was part of the people who decided to rent the space and start a studio. And I was the one who happened to have the LA3A compressor, and the two 1176LN compressors, and also I had the AKGC460—I mean, I had equipment. I was at the start.
SP: So that's basically what you do as far as "work" goes.
CS: Absolutely.
SP: So you're part-owner, then.
CS: Yep. But there's a lot of owners. Currently, there are seven owners; one of them is silent, because he quit. But that doesn't mean he's gotten his money back; all it means is that he quit. I think somebody agreed to pay him his money. It's kind of hard to cash out of a business that doesn't make money, you know what I'm saying?
SP: Do you break even?
CS: Oh, yeah. What happened with that studio was it *almost* broke even for about a year, and then subsequently it's been doing pretty well. It was probably only booked about 120 days out of the first year. But since then things have been going really well out there.
SP: The new Babe the blue OX album was done there, I notice.
DC: They've done all their albums there.
CS: It was recorded in its entirety there. Everything that was put on it was recorded there. And also the new Fred Schneider record that Steve Albini did.
SP: Oh—what was that like?
CS: It's like punk or rockabilly.
SP: I've been trying to decide from descriptions whether I would like it or not.
CS: You would probably think it was *highly* amusing.
SP: Well, I do think Fred Scheider is pretty amusing.
DC: Remember when he did "Monster in My Pants"?
SP: That was kind of dopey.
CS: There's no forgiving that.
DC: It was pretty stupid.
CS: A lot of people are going to buy it just because it's great novelty Fred Schneider with Steve Albini producing, with Russell Simmins playing drums, Six Finger Satellite, and Rick Sims from the Didjits.
SP: [to Dorit] What exactly is it that your part-time job is?
DC: I assist a museum director from Switzerland. I mainly do translation and design work. It's a very small nonprofit arts space—it is actually the place where the record release party was held, the Kunsthalle.
SP: I thought maybe that that might have been the case.
DC: As it is very small, I do everything and nothing. It is OK. I actually these days would very much like to—I could fill the whole week just working the record and working the band, and I wish I had the time. And I'm kind of these days very much trying to brainstorm on how I can maybe just do translations at home—or even on the road!
SP: Freelance.
DC: Yes, I need more time.
SP: When people ask me what Halcion sounds like, I say, well, you know, it's kind of in the area where Led Zeppelin and King Crimson intersect.
DC: It's very funny you say that, because another person described Halcion as a mixture of King Crimson circa "Starless," around that period, which I think is Mr. Swanberg's guitar esthetic influence...
SP: Sure. Me too. That's where all the tritones come from.
DC: Mingled with a lot of other...I mean, the whole vocal aspect is like a whole other story.
CS: Yeah, I mean I definitely listened to lots of Zeppelin between the ages of ten and thirteen. And continued to hear it. And parts of it I really liked. I don't, however, like Robert Plant's lyrics. In general most of the lyrics are not that great. Some of them as time gets further on, if you actually listen to some of the stuff—like my favorite lyric of all time of Robert Plant's is the one from "Southbound Suarez," which I think is hilarious. And also the sort of funny ones he wrote for *In through the Out Door*. I think they're very funny. But "Stairway to Heaven" is purely embarrassing.
SP: Who are your favorite guitar players?
CS: My absolute favorite guitar players? Well, in order, Mark Farner [laughter], John Fogerty...this could go on too long. Let's do it later. Let's continue to keep the conversation going. Because you know what you're going to end up with is like a list of forty different guitar players. So, to be continued.

something like AB-AC-AD-B-AD-C: a chain that suddenly reshuffles itself into a variation on the usual verse/chorus/ bridge/coda. It's one of my two favorites in their output.

Speaking of King Crimson, the immediately following "Messy Marvin" is their song that most shows that influence. Excrutiatingly dissonant chord, jagged rhythm, dead stop. Repeat, continue with a nearby equally dissonant chord. Repeat again, continue further with a more consonant but still jagged sequence. Run through the whole section again, this time giving way to smoother rhythms with open chords a tritone apart. This entire middle section has a disturbing, forward-rolling quality with almost entirely spoken vocal (except for a brief choruslike sequence). It rounds off with two more iterations of the opening section. It's a tight, neat, inexorable three-part structure, one of their very best numbers.

"Lemongrass" is a power ballad, pastoral Am-G-F verses gathering to a pair of pounding chords introducing a more extroverted version of the main chord sequence, which supports a screaming guitar solo and then a cathartic chorus.

Immediately follows the feedback shriek introducing "Yellow." It's a remarkably simple song, one trudging chord and its minor leading tone, with the limping, lurching four-plus-two rhythm miraculously keeping it from monotony. It seethes, then surges (galvanized by howling lead guitar), then explodes into the heavy fanfarelike chords of the chorus—briefly interrupted by a pretty interlude—which rises to a remarkable roar (both instrumental and vocal). It's nothing more (or less!) than pure metal power, and has always been a live highlight.

SP: So, Jeff...
CS: ...how long have you been in Halcion?
SP: Tell us the story of how you got to be in Halcion.
JW: How I Got To Be In Halcion. Well, I had fallen off of a ten-foot-high platform...
CS: Oh, yeah, I fell off a cliff!
JW: ...breaking my jaw, and I was laid up for a while, and apparently they needed a bass player, and Dorit called, and I happened to have the time to learn the songs because it's hard to sell tickets, which is my day job, when you have a broken jaw. But you can play the bass. So I learned the songs, and this was October last year. Then we went and did the Marilyn Manson tour for three weeks.
CS: [affected tone] Which was brilliant. It was brilliant.
SP: That must have been an interesting crowd to play for.
CS: [still affected] Oh, it's such a *fascinating* crowd!
DC: It was all-ages shows
CS: It was good to play [for all ages].
SP: One of my coworkers' best friend's twelve-year-old sister is absolutely nuts about Marilyn Manson...
DC: That's the age group that they have.
SP: ...And I read the review of the show, and I thought, "I don't want to go see that!" If I had gotten to see you guys on that tour, I would have seen you guys and *left*.
JW: It's something to see once, though, at least. Seeing it every night was sort of like watching an episode of *Gomer Pyle* over and over or something.
CS: You don't mean that as a negative comment about Jim Nabors, do you? He was very talented! What a crooner!
JW: I would never say anything to slander Jim Nabors. I'm sure I didn't mean to imply something like that.
CS: Mr. Manson is also quite a crooner. On the order of Jim Nabors [laughter]
SP: [to Jeff] Have you been in bands before?
JW: Yes, I have. In high school I played in cover bands, the typical thing, playing Rush cover songs, and Who songs, and stuff like that, and a band called White Noise. Of which there were probably fifty at the exact same time with the exact same name in high schools across America. That was in the suburbs of Boston, in Wellesley. Then I moved into Boston and played for a while in a couple different bands, one of which was Carnal Carnival, an unfortunate name, and a band that had bad, bad luck but were sort of infamous in Boston; for about three or four years people were well aware of what we were doing. Then I came here, played in a *masterful* punk/pop band called Supple...
CS: Which originally was called Chrysler.
JW: Yup.
DC: But then I threatened to strangle him, so he changed his name.
CS: We didn't actually know Jeffrey at the time he was in Chrysler.
JW: That's true. And that brings us up to now.
DC: I saw Jeff playing with Supple, and I thought Supple was...
CS: It was OK.
SP: Have you always been a bass player?
CS: He plays a mean blues guitar, I've heard him do it.
JW: I started out playing guitar, moved to bass around 16, I played guitar in Supple for a while, but generally bass.
SP: And you're involved in the magazine, where you did the interview with Halcion.
JW: Yes, exactly, that's how we originally met. The magazine *Pit Report/Endangered Species*...
DC: How did you find out about us?
JW: Dale from Thumper, who was playing in Supple at the time. Halcion were the first band that I interviewed for *Pit Report*.
CS: [astonished] The *very* first one? I didn't realize that. That wasn't that long ago!
JW: I had asked people in Supple who were good bands to go and see or to interview, and Dale May—great guy, who plays drums in Thumper and did play drums in Supple—said, "Oh, you gotta go see this band Halcion." And that was that.
CS: That's really nice, Dale, thanks a lot! I appreciate that. I also like Dale's drumming, by the way; Dale is a fine drummer.
SP: Have I ever told you guys the story about how I discovered you guys?
CS: Yeah, you happened to go see the Babe the blue OX/Versus show, right? No, the Swirlies...
SP: No, no. It was Babe the blue OX. I was going to see them for the very first time, at Brownies. A friend of mine had said, this is a band that's up your alley, Babe the blue OX; so I bought the album, and said yeah, I can't stop playing this, I have to go see them. So I went to see them...
CS: The first album. Which was great.
SP: Yeah. Great album. And I got there a little early, and there was Halcion playing. And I said, "Huh! This is really interesting, too!" And if I remember correctly you had just started playing "Foam" when I got there—the set was like three-quarters over—I think I heard "Foam" and "Bend Down" that first time. And then two weeks later you guys played with Swirlies at the Bank, and that was the first time I saw a whole set, or spoke to any of you. And the rest is

(If I'd been sequencing the album I'd have followed "Crime" with the title song "Lemongrass," then direct into "Yellow" and save "Messy Marvin" for after that; but that's only because the last two songs were the two sides of their Twitcher single, and I got used to hearing them juxtaposed in that order. It's a trivial point since the sequencing doesn't fail to work the way it is.)

"With Biology of No Importance" begins with a twice-repeated chiming chord so distinctive it acts as a motif to which the long, quiet, slowly-uncoiling ballad gradually winds up to, sparking off a spitting guitar solo and final chorus.

"Polynesian Flower" is yet another ballad (and perhaps should have been separated from its predecessor); its chunky guitar sequence has a striking bent note in it. It is a little more midtempo, with more forward motion, and builds to an urgent final chorus (though the very brief coda recalls the opening serenity).

"Goldfever" qualifies as a "typical" Halcion song, a strong one-riff rocker with an anthemic chorus (not unlike their single "Squelch" which didn't make the album).

In its usual next-to-last position is the epic "Carrie," at 5:26 easily the longest track on the album (apart from the leisurely "Biology"). It has a concentric form: the slow, quiet (but tense) opening two verses are balanced by the slow, quiet (but relaxed) coda; the main part has a long central interlude. It's also a very intricate structure, where down to the relationship of the chords there is a fascinating hierarchy of AA (parallel) and AB (contrasting)

(continued on next page)

history.

[to Dorit] One of the strange things I've noticed in the somewhat larger media when they talk about Halcion—which is not very often, but they do—they really seem to fasten on this image of you're the front person, you're the thing they focus on, and it seems so strange to me, because it's a *band.*

DC: I think there are two different categories of press in general, or media, and one of them is like, "give us something..." I mean, you are a person who truly listens to the music and is interested in the musical development, and the fact is, it does not...today we saw a review in a fanzine that basically talked about my vocals, and Chad said with a bitter tone in his voice, "Oh, *you* got a nice review" [laughter], and I felt like it really is unjustified, because this is a band, and it's a very musical band, and everyone is coloring the sound a whole lot and is very important, and Chad and me write together.

SP: None of the songs would work without both guitars.

DC: Obviously. But that's why the word F-R-O-N-T exists: people don't have the time and the nerves or like the detailed information, and just want something—they want fast-food input that they can clench their teeth into, and I am the *front* person, I am the one that sings, that's the word for it...

CS: She likes it, she loves to be in the front, and it's good that somebody wants to do it. I certainly couldn't do it all the time.

DC: The fact is, it has its ups and downs; I like to sing, but as much as it can be amusing, it's also a lot of pressure to bear. And sometimes it's not really fair to the rest of the band, I totally agree.

CS: It doesn't bother me; it really doesn't. I get a chance to tweak with my [guitar].

DC: I think it's a very common thing in this kind of world, the rock music world.

CS: I mean, what is David Pirner? It is Soul Asylum.

SP: Right. Or Courtney Love, for that matter.

CS: Yeah. I mean, think about it.

DC: The fact is, you can influence it to a certain degree; I mean you can take certain paths to work against it or to work towards it.

CS: One thing that's nice; Dorit is no Shirley Manson [The way Butch Vig and Garbage chose her was] not from going to see shows; what they did was they watched screen tests of the potential singers. You know what I'm talking about? They watched videos, clips of people on video. It was really unbelievable.

SP: I'm curious to know—although I have my guesses—who writes what?

CS: Well, just guess.

DC: You probably know.

CS: It's like Lennon and McCartney—everybody writes everything.

SP: [to Dorit] You wrote "Squelch"...

DC: No. Totally wrong.

SP: Really?? "Yellow"?

DC: Yes.

CS: Except she did not write the bridge of "Yellow." That was something I came up with.

SP: The quiet part.

CS: Yes.

SP: That makes sense to me. But you [Chad] wrote "Squelch"?

CS: Oh yeah. A very long time ago. An incredibly long time ago. Way, way, way before any of the songs that people compare it to. It's definitely something from like six years ago.

SP: Are you going to put that on an album?

CS: There's a bunch of people who really like the song, and if we become happy with a recording of it we'll put it out.

SP: Not one of my particular favorites.

CS: The single version of that song is not something I'm all that happy with. However, the demo version was really cool. If it was a little more together in the rhythm section we would have put it on the record, I have a feeling.

SP: So you wrote "Foam"...

CS: Yeah, yeah. I asked Dorit to write the vocals.

DC: All the ones where you say Chad...

SP: I'm talking about the guitar parts.

DC: Yeah. OK. Good.

SP: And "Messy Marvin"...

CS: Yes.

DC: Obviously.

SP: And in "Crime" you [Dorit] wrote the verses and the chorus...

DC: Yes.

SP: ...and you [Chad] wrote the bridge and the coda...

[momentary confusion while everyone sings the riffs and tries to figure out what everybody means by "bridge" or "coda"]

DC: He wrote the [middle] riff, I wrote the bridge [and coda]. So not all your guesses are right. But close.

SP: But close. My guesses have been based on—yours [Dorit's] tend to be a little smoother and a little more melodic, and his tend to be a little more jagged and a little more dissonant—tritones. And, it also depends on whose guitar is carrying the song. Chad wrote "Foam," and so his guitar part is what's making it go, and you're playing along.

DC: And a song like "Polynesian Flower" clearly was written by me...

CS: ...because I'm playing this obbligato part.

SP: Right. You're playing lead over top of it.

DC: And he doesn't like it.

CS: What!? [laughter] It takes me a long

pairs: the opening slightly dissonant arpeggio, for example, is balanced by a slightly more consonant one; this pair is balanced by another pair of even more consonant chords; this pair of pairs is further balanced by a rounding-off arpeggio which resolves the harmony (coming to rest on the last note of a descending sequence running under the whole harmonic structure). The entire section is repeated more urgently to establish it more firmly.

This whole prelude, as I said, is mirrored and balanced by the postlude, the arpeggios replaced by sweeping strums, the dissonant chord by a consoling major seventh, the less dissonant by a clear major, balanced by the same fully consonant arpeggios, resolving and then resolving further to an even more satisfying ending needing no continuation.

The main section thus parenthesized—the storm the expectant opening prepares for and the clear-sky closing sweeps away like a cloud—is based on a pair of contrasting chords: an inhaling C major chord with a tensing-up ascending scale over it and a huge-sounding, resonant exhaling E minor chord. It moves swiftly, if a bit heavily. The central interlude or bridge (much like its counterpart in "Yellow") is the eye of the storm, at first relaxed (in parallel phrases with vocal) then in contrast winding up for the main section's return. Before the interlude this main section supports a vocal, after it a guitar solo: another contrast/parallel.

The song bears a circumstantial resemblance to Led Zeppelin's "Achilles' Last Stand," with its dissonant opening arpeggio (though Halcion makes an entire two-verse intro out of it), C-with-scale and Em main part, and the return to the dissonant

time to come up with decent parts with songs like that.

DC: If something has been written, and there's already a very dominant guitar, it's very difficult—it takes time for Chad to find a corner...

CS: "Bend Down" was really a bitch. That was *the* bitchingest song of all time.

DC: I remember "Polynesian Flower" and "Bend Down" you both really had problems with, because the guitar parts were written and it was kind of difficult to add...

SP: You [Dorit] wrote "Bend Down"?

DC: Yes.

CS: If I had a guitar I could point out what is particular to my guitar part about "Bend Down." The shifting harmony over the main riff, the Lydian flat 7th thing? That's something I came up with.

SP: I know what that means, I'm not sure I know which part of the song you're talking about.

[Technical discussion of Lydian scales, with a smoke break.]

CS: The main section [sings riff of "Bend Down"] Dorit had the flat 7th and the tritone, but then I created the shifting harmony that exists with that. But I give her total credit for coming up with a really cool basic concept.

SP: That's one of the things I've always liked about your stuff a lot, is the complexity of the forms. "Carrie" has a very complex concentric form, and I particularly like the way that "Crime"...

CS: I know you had your criticisms of that song, but we probably had the arrangement that you once suggested in our minds as being the thing we had to stymie and destroy.

SP: That's fine, too. I think I sometimes write you notes about songs too quickly; when I hear the song some more it's like, "No, it's all right." I don't have a major complaint; "Crime" is one of my favorite songs of yours; "Carrie" and "Crime" are my two favorites.

CS: "Bend Down" would have been better if you could have heard more of the upper harmonies of the guitar in the main section. Then the recording on the record would have come out better, and I don't have any idea how I managed the oversight of [not] getting those things in there.

SP: Did you fiddle with the mix of "Yellow" and "With Biology of No Importance"?

CS: No. "Yellow" is absolutely 100% [the same].

SP: OK. It was just my imagination. When I first heard the album it sounded to me like the power chords had more crunch and the lead guitar was just a hair further back. But when I went back and listened to the singles [I wasn't so sure].

CS: "With Biology of No Importance" actually sports an entirely new vocal. 100% new vocal. The vocal was recorded in February of 1996, and put on tracks that were done in August of 1993.

SP: Yes, I noticed that.

CS: The reason is, we totally redid "Biology." Did you ever hear the redone "Biology"?

SP: Yes, I complained to you about it, in fact.

CS: But even though I like it, it's not the same song; in a way, it's a different song. Also, if you listen to the guitar solo on "Biology," the phrases are much more coherent.

SP: Did you redo the guitar solo, too?

CS: No. It's just the way it was recorded originally was alternating phrasing, and this one what I did I comped it; I put it together. So it's much more coherent-sounding.

SP: You know something I just noticed about "Yellow" within the last week? It's in 6/4.

CS: Absolutely!

SP: I had always wondered why—it's such a simple, almost "You Really Got Me" kind of heavy-metal song...

CS: And why is it not so boring. It's not boring because it's in 6/4.

SP: Right.

CS: That's Dorit's riff. She always comes up with good riffs.

[smoke break over]

SP: I was just saying to Chad that I just noticed, after listening to "Yellow" for two years, that it's in 6/4.

DC: It has an odd rhythm, yeah. [everyone counts it out] You know why you noticed it...

SP: Because I counted it.

DC: You know why you especially noticed it last week [at the CD release party], because we brought the accents more out, I think.

SP: That's not why. There's a sense in which I hear it every time you do it, and there's a sense in which I don't hear it every time you do it, because I've heard it so many times. Both of those things are true.

CS: That's definitely true.

SP: We've been through this before: when you first did "Yellow" you did it really, really slow, and I thought it was terrific, and then you stopped doing that.

DC: We did it a bit faster. Even though now we're not playing it that fast, I think with Dave Barekow, our [last] drummer, I think we did it in the fastest version ever. Now we're going back to doing it a bit slower again.

SP: I think the recording is about as fast as it gets.

CS: Pretty much. That single is a great single.

DC: It's a good recording.

arpeggio at the end (again, a whole section in the Halcion song). "Carrie" illustrates most fully Halcion's talent for reshuffling the ordinary parts of a conventional pop song into a larger, equally logical, and even more satisfying structure. Easily my favorite, I consider it Halcion's finest moment.

After "Carrie" is a 36-second track called "For Starters," featuring a very young child (Chrysler's cousin) singing in German; it's almost insufferably cute. It's directly encroached upon by the opening chords of the finale, "Bend Down."

This is another large multipart song with chugging minor chords, interrupting riffs, quiet interludes, and spirited choruses, all arranged in a satisfyingly complex structure. It used to be a frequent set-closer, but they don't play it that often anymore; therefore I don't know it as well as equally-worthy songs, and I suspect I underrate it a bit (something I hope to remedy now that I have the recording). It certainly brings the album to a strong conclusion.

Two more things. I don't find the packaging very attractive (though the large orange-with-yellow-shadow lettering of the band name "pops," as they say in publishing). And I'm surprised and disappointed that they left off "Foam," another of their very best songs, one they've failed to play only once or twice in all the many times I've seen them, and a majority of the time their closing number. It's a pity.

All in all, despite my minor carping, a debut album with four first-rate songs and five very good ones makes an excellent score; and I for one will be listening to it a lot now that it exists.

CS: I'm really into that single. It encapsulates a certain period of the band that was at its absolutely heaviest and noisiest.
SP: Those are definitely two of your best songs; those two and "Crime" and "Carrie" which are my two favorites...
DC: You said you liked "Grass Stains," some of the new stuff, "Something to Remember"—which was something that Jon and Jeffrey wrote.
SP: That's right. Why don't you talk a little about that, Jeff; you and Jon are actually doing some writing in two of the new songs.
JW: We seem to be averaging, what, like a new song every six weeks, or something like that, which is nice...
CS: Maybe even better—a month.
JW: A month or six weeks. It's nice that we're not forcing it, but producing new stuff on a fairly regular basis. It seems to come one of two ways, either Jon and I will be jamming, he'll be playing a beat and I'll be playing a bassline, which in two songs I think has ended up becoming the verse, then Chad or Dorit will come up with a chorus and a bridge. Or sometimes Dorit or Chad will come up an entire piece all done out that we just arrange. But it's neat when stuff comes out from all of us, because it seems extremely organic. They take longer that way; when Dorit comes down with something completed it takes...
[Simultaneous dialogue explaining that "Baptized" had come together in nearly no time at all.]
SP: Very effective song, but a very simple song.
JW: ...and "Grass Stains"—that was painful.
CS: That was the toughest one yet actually. Wasn't it?
DC: Yeah, we were chewing on that one for a while.
CS: It took a really long time, and it has a lot of different sections, and nobody could remember what they were for a while [laughter]. "What was the next section?" "I can't remember."
SP: I've just done little tiny bits of that kind of thing, and I can imagine how messy it can be.
CS: That's the song, I think...we're about to go into the studio to do a demo, and I'm *totally* sure that this is going to be the killer demo of all time. I have it in the palm of my hand like a nice apple or a golf ball...
DC: It's so nice now to have a formation, where the songwriting is really working, it's a shared experience, it's really beautiful. And I think we all feel very good about all the new stuff.
SP: So Jon told me you may actually record this summer? A new album?
CS: Mr. Flack? We're going to record a demo, we're going into this little Lower East Side studio...
DC: [simultaneously] Well, we're going to demo it; we'll see what's going to happen, we might have the option to go with a certain producer to make some really fancy, big 48-track versions of some of them. We'll see; a lot can happen, and a lot of unforeseen things happen, but our next goal is to document the songs as good as we can, 16-track in Jeffrey's bedroom, and that will be sounding really good. And after that, we'll hopefully have a chance to do it again—even better.
SP: What old songs didn't make it on the album? Tell me about "Foam"—why isn't it on the album? (That's the fifth best—it's one of your best songs.)
CS: "Foam" is not on the record because it is the most problematic in a lot of ways because the riff itself is difficult—*really* difficult—to come up with a tone that works. Because it has to be steely, but clean, but pianolike, there's all these things—I can't play it on certain guitars, I can't play it on a Les Paul, I can't play it through certain amplifiers—and whenever it was that we actually recorded the one that was *supposed* to be on the album—the one we'd previously done was a demo version, it's slow and the drumming is sloppy, if you've noticed (nothing against the drummer, who's a great drummer, Dave Soloff)—the second version of it that we did—which was tracked I believe the same night we did "Crime," actually—it didn't really work because of a bunch of things. I actually think Jason [Frangos, original bass player] and Dave Barekow played great on it, and everything was great, but—it had to do with the overdubs: the guitar sounds didn't really work out, and we were really gung-ho about getting it finished by a certain date, and then we tried to mix it, and then we weren't happy, and then we *re*-mixed it, and in general there was just something—you never heard the version from last year, did you? It's just nothing that special.
SP: No.
DC: We'll do a good version for the next record.
SP: It's just that I think I would have put the shortest odds of that song making the album out of all the songs
CS: Yeah, it's like the *one* that would have been on the record.
SP: It's the show-closer! It's been the show-closer for a long time.
DC: I know, and it's a good one.
SP: So what are the old songs that are still around...
CS: "Water 100" didn't make the record...
SP: Never heard that!
CS: It's the one that goes [sings, imitating Dorit] "Crawling on the floor/soul is full

of dirt..."
SP: I really don't think I've heard that one.
CS: It starts in F#.
JW: With Chad singing just like that. [laughter]
CS: I actually sing it a little more like Morrissey than that.
DC: And the song that Chad sings...
SP: "Crazed."
DC: That is the song that Jason plays guitar on.
SP: Right. I saw that one.
DC: That's a very good song, and we got a nice recording of it, too, but we found that stylistically it somehow was so different than the rest...
SP: And you want to establish your sound on the record.
DC: Yeah, and [Jason] was not in the band anymore, but maybe the main reason was that it just somehow stylistically didn't fit: there were certain parts that I was never happy with, and some parts of it that I really liked, but it was just not perfect.
SP: What about "Bruce"?
CS: That's a funny story, because there's a version of it that's OK, from a long time ago, but in general it has slightly too-metalish guitars.
DC: All the songs that did not make it did not have the ideal recording.
CS: Then we tried to do it again last summer, with Rob Sutton and J.G. Thirlwell—who was actually kind of there but kind of not there—and what ended up happening with that was I didn't have a guitar that was correctly set up to play this song...
DC: That is a very difficult song to make sound really good.
CS: And it's a *total* bitch—the song is very, very difficult. It's on a guitar that's tuned really screwed-up.
SP: Do you use alternate tunings?
CS: Yeah, like for instance you know "Royal Solitude"?
SP: Yeah, I've heard it a few times, I remember it.
CS: That song is done in open Dm—D-A-D-F-A-D. My friend Gerald calls it "the *sad* tuning." [laughter] But if you listen to it, there's nothing minor in the song—it's all major, because the F is always changed. But it's just that it's easy to play in that tuning.
SP: And of course you use dropped-D all the time.
CS: Not all the time.
SP: About half the time.
CS: "Crime" isn't dropped-D.
DC: "Polynesian Flower" has a different tuning.
CS: D-A-D-E-A-D.
DC: Other than that my tuning is pretty [normal].
SP: I wanted to ask you about "Polynesian Flower"—it's just a really piddly little point—on the record, the song ends, and then you do the last two bits of the lyric; whereas every time [live]—including the last time, because I was listening for it—you do it *on* the last two chords.
DC: It's funny, because I thought about that last Wednesday, and I thought "Oh, I should do it like on the record," but it's a matter of I'm getting so involved and excited within the song, and especially the last chorus, that I just forget. It's a little detail that happens—life is being dealt with spontaneously. Even though I think it would be nice if I say it afterwards.
SP: I like it better when it's on the chords.
DC: Really?
SP: Well, of course it's what I'm used to. With all of these songs, how many times have I heard you play them?
CS: Don, out of all the questions you've asked, that one is by far the most trivial.
DK: Yes. I think I said that before I asked the question.
DC: You must be the one person in New York that has seen us the most times...
CS: ...that notices anything about our music.
SP: Well, it's been an *awful* lot.
DC: And that's a compliment.
SP: What is the significance of the the two cherries on the logo?
DC: I do like the visual/graphic aspect in general; I'm interested in graphics. And for my lyrics and for my interpretations of songs, I wanted to find something that's very luscious, very sexual, and in general fruits have that capacity for me.
CS: Yeah, but the genitals were censored.
DC: Those specific cherries don't really have that much meaning, I just really liked them from the visual [standpoint], and the fact that they are something very luscious and sensual.
SP: You said that the little voice on the album singing "Sugar Baby"...
DC: That's my niece.
SP: How old is she?
DC: The daughter of my sister. I think she's four or five. She's very talented, she's very artistic, and I think she sings it very charming.
CS: She actually *sounds* talented singing the song.
SP: It can't be that easy to prounounce all those words at that speed, no matter what age you are, and she really does manage to do it.
DC: She sings it with very nice emphasis on what the words mean, but in a really innocent way; it's a very chauvinistic song, but she doesn't know that. It's like this very innocent mixture—she sings very innocently, but very passionately, something fairly dirty, and I like that combination a lot.
SP: How often do you guys rehearse?
DC: As much as we can. Three times a week is the general...we play more sometimes, too.
JW: If we have an event coming up that we have to rehearse for, we'll rehearse five or six times a week.
DC: Every day.
JW: We just did that show, so we'll take one or two [days off]
CS: I think these guys are overstating it. I think it's more likely that we rehearse twice a week when we're kind of in our slack periods, and then maybe three times a week...
SP: How long do you rehearse when you rehearse?
DC: Never less than two or three hours. Between two and four hours.
CS: ...unless we're getting ready for a tour, like last June and last October, we would rehearse five or six times a week.
SP: OK, so you're going to go record a demo soon...are you planning another tour anytime soon?
DC: We very much hope so. We're just waiting for confirmation, and that's the higher forces, meaning our booking agent. We're waiting and we're hoping, and I know they're working on it. There's nothing we can do right now but leaning back and doing stuff in the meantime. We *hope* to be on the road in summer.

Discography

"Squelch" b/w "With Biology of No Importance"
(Quixotic 008-7, 1993) [7" vinyl single]

"Yellow" b/w "Messy Marvin"
(Twitcher VV 9401, 1995) [7" vinyl single]

Halcion
[No label], 1995 [4-song cassete]

Lemongrass **(Twitcher TW 004, 1996)**

live reviews

Skeleton Key/Vitapup/Varnaline

The Cooler, January 19th

This was Second Chance Night, or Reputation Rehabilitation Night. I got to the Cooler on the early side, and took a seat on the floor against the wall to wait for the unlisted opening band, Varnaline, to take the stage. Their name rang a nagging dim bell in my mind, but I couldn't place them.

I had contemplated sitting their set out, but immediately they started I stood up and took notice; it was the drum parts, with lots of backbeat, that gave their essentially ordinary three-chord rockers a real spark. And as I watched the drummer really getting into his drum parts, with lots of headbanging...I realized that it was Jud Ehrbar, the drummer from Space Needle, whose set a month or so ago I had intensely disliked. Well, open my ears.

It turns out that the guitar player (and band leader) of the trio, Anders Parker, is the third member of Space Needle as well. His singing was utterly tuneless, and so for those songs where the chord sequences blanded out there was nothing to hold the ear, but most of the songs had tried & true harmonic bases. One of the slower ones had a very effective Neil Young lope. The guitar solos were a little wild and crazy, but economical in scope. I was never transported, but I was never either bored or irritated; a pretty good set. Varnaline is a much better (though more conventional) band than Space Needle.

I had seen a few songs by Skeleton Key when the followed Halcion the previous November, but they didn't make much of an impression, and I left after a couple songs. But I thought (especially when a friend repeatedly sang their praises) that I should give them the courtesy of a full set.

They bring out mounds of percussion equipment, including metal tanks, refrigerator trays, a large child's wagon, etc. They have a drummer as well as a percussionist to go with guitar and bass. Both string players are quite talented (so are the percussionists, for that matter), and with the buzzsaw guitar sound and jagged riffing they would seem in the abstract to be a band I'd really like. So why did they leave me lukewarm?

I think (I'm not sure) that for all their edginess their harmonies are quite normal (regular major and minor chords), and though their rhythms are highly decorated (somewhat in the manner of the much more layered rhythms on Talking Heads' Remain in Light), there's no syncopation, and almost no backbeat. In short, they are not nearly as radical as my ear expected them to be. True, they hit some pretty good grooves here and there (and a few audience members were dancing really hard to them), but there was only one riff (a bridge riff that also ended the song) that really struck me; otherwise, I thought they were a strong and talented band but not quite to my taste.

After that was Vitapup, whom I saw a year and a half ago and really disliked. They've gotten so much positive response elsewhere, though, that I thought I owed them one more chance as well. And I didn't hate them. The main problem with this trio is that they're all over the place. One song will be kind of punkish with annoying shouted vocals; another will be a kind of surferish instrumental; another will be a midtempo dissonant rocker. They called out a woman [Jane Hohenberger: see further on] to sing an entirely a cappella blues number; she later read a poem as well. The bassist recited a free verse poem while the guitarist changed a string. They also called out a rapper to perform with them; and the final number had both the rapper and the woman singer/poet. A real multimedia event. And none of it really grabbed me; whatever they are aiming for misses me entirely.

Since I had seen most of an Ultra Bidé set quite recently and was surer what I thought of them, I skipped their set and started for home. On the way I discovered a song running through my head that was something I liked that was the sort of thing Skeleton Key and Vitapup were not quite doing for me. Turned out to be a Dirt Merchants song. And I think that Dirt Merchants are—harmonically at least— more genuinely radical than any of the bands I saw.

I ended up with more respect for the bands, but I have satisfied my urge to give them their due.

Ida/Church of Betty/ 101 Crustaceans

AlterKnit, January 20th

This was my first visit to the AlterKnit, the Knitting Factory's little downstairs room, which is really tiny, about half the width of the main stage and a room less than half as deep as well; it might hold a hundred people?

I ask myself every time I go to see Ida why I don't listen to their album more often; it may be that they've improved a lot as a live band. Their electric guitar playing and the swells and fades of their music are sounding a little more like Liquorice (Dan Littleton's other band with Jenny Toomey of Tsunami) and less like the more acoustic sound somewhere in the large territory staked out by Low and Mazzy Star characteristic of their CD. The slow and keening "Shotgun" (with Littleton and Liz Mitchell singing at the top of their ranges in harmony, with quite a build in the middle) and the swaying "Equator" were standouts. They began with a nice Scrawl song and ended (before encoring with "Boyfriend") with a very fine Nick Drake song (someone else I keep forgetting to investigate).

Then came Church of Betty for my third go 'round. I'm liking Chris Rael's slightly odd Peter Blegvadish songs a little better as I get used to them, though "The Conversation" (which he cowrote with casioist Ed Pastorini), with its strikingly dissonant harmony and that wonderful instrumental bridge with ascending bassline, insistent guitar figure, and bitonal keyboard chord, is still the highlight of the set. I also particularly noticed this time the fluent bass work of Cindy Rickmond and the solid drumming of Jan Kotik. This material is also an album in progress. [The band is now on hiatus, and the completed album has not been released. Pity.]

Finally was my first live experience of Ed Pastorini's own band, 101 Crustaceans. He spent most of the set behind a grand piano taking up much of the stage, with Oren Bloedow (another avant rocker who has been in several other bands whom I heard on the Thirsty Ears compilation) on bass plus another excellent drummer and a guitar player who was as comfortable in jazz styles as rock styles. The material was mostly in that avant area where it's hard to tell whether it's jazz or rock (like Henry Cow, though they don't sound any more like Henry Cow than Ornette Coleman sounds like Cecil Taylor). I enjoyed it all, but the best number was one of the two where Pastorini played second guitar; it's called "Tell the World," and begins with Pastorini singing to a kind of dissonant folk chord sequence; his voice has the same nervous rubato as David Grubbs of Gastr del Sol, but Pastorini always has a pulse (on his guitar or piano), if not an actual strong rhythm, to ground it (which Grubbs never does). The second strain brought drums, bass, and lead guitar lightly in to accompany the folky

chords; then the whole thing exploded into, well, it wasn't quite counterpoint, but all four instruments were syncopated in such a way that they were jumping in and out of prominence. It was, like "The Conversation" during Church of Betty, the most intense moment of pleasure of the set. And I learned after that it's the newest song.

Capsize 7/Jon Spencer Blues Explosion

Brownies, January 22

I had walked the block or so to Brownies with the intention of seeing one early band; in the event I stayed to see four bands.

I'd heard the Caroline CD by Capsize 7, yet another North Carolina alternative band, and quite liked it. Not unusually, the edge of their sound is sanded off by the "good" production, and I found their live sound had much more impact. They have a relentless, uptempo energy, fairly normal chords but lots of sequences a half-step apart which I like. Because too many songs had the same foursquare tempo (and too many were in E), I found the songs in triple time (especially the one with the rhythmic pattern 3+3+3+2+2, same as Tori Amos' "Precious Things," though to different effect) even more impressive. The drummer is terrific and drives the band; the guitarists and bassist are good and solid, and maybe don't do enough things different from one another, but I didn't really care. I'll go see them again sometime, and keep listening to their album.

I ended up hanging around in the back during the set by Speed King, kind of a dance band; the drummer and the bassist played strong one-chord grooves while the keyboardist and guitar played repeating figures over it. Like Moonshake a couple weeks previously, it didn't do anything for me at all.

Next was Poem Rocket, who I'd confused with the Bottle Rockets and didn't think I'd like, but as soon as they started my ears perked up, and I wended my way to the front. And as I moved the sound got louder and more powerful, once again twigging me to the tremendous difference that even a few feet of distance can make (I don't suspect Brownies can be more than 75 feet deep). Their 2guitarbass&drum sound was based around the lead singer's very strong, edgy single-chord strumming, with steady support from bass and drums (both Speedking and Poem Rocket, almost inevitably, have female bass players) and lead feedback guitar screeching over top. A most impressive din, something on the order of Killing Joke or Joy Division/New Order. They didn't need more than one chord at a time. I was impressed, and subsequently sought them out on disc as well.

The reason I'd stayed so long was I found out early in the evening that there was going to be a secret midnight set by the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion. They don't play small places much (they played Irving Plaza the last time I remember them being around), and they have a tremendous reputation, and so I felt like this was my best opportunity to see them play (and for six bucks for the whole evening, to boot).

The band is a three-piece, two guitars (Spencer and Judah Bauer) and drums (Russell Simmins). They've been hyped a great deal; I remember one reviewer saying they were the best live band in New York.

Well, I don't think so. I was not knocked over; they play a very simple style, greatly stripped-down blues licks (often the same on both guitars), with one- or two-note solos when there are solos at all, seldom going the whole way through the twelve bars of standard blues. This means that they rely on energy, and style, and attitude, to carry the performance. All of these they have in abundance (the drummer, in particular, is excellent). But for me that just isn't enough.

One way to put it is that anyone who thinks early Elvis Presley is the epitome of rock'n'roll will think that the Blues Explosion is the greatest thing since sliced bread; I certainly don't. Another way to put it is that it's really boy rock-'n'roll, and I'm no longer very sympathetic to that attitude.

There's no doubt they're good at what they do; they play this simple music with enormous panache. But I kept waiting for something else to happen.

Which briefly did in the first encore, an instrumental where Spencer played a busier, more chromatic, bassish riff while Bauer overlaid it with syncopated, dissonant, slightly jazzy blues chords. It was terrific, and if they'd done more stuff like that I'd've liked them better.

Halcion

The Cooler, January 26th

A year before almost to the day, Halcion had played their first 1995 gig at the Cooler, and to begin had unveiled a brand-new song called "Crime." It knocked me flat, and the rest of the set was one of the best of the many shows I've seen them do.

Turned out when I got there this time around 10 p.m. that Halcion was on first (I could tell by the guitars), but they weren't due on until 11. Argh. So I stood around and chatted with their new rhythm section for a while. And as it happened, Halcion didn't go on until at least 11:15.

It was worth the wait.

Halcion came out *smoking*. They opened with "Crime" as they had a year ago (now my second favorite after "Carrie," which they don't play anymore). From the first headslamming riff it was clear this was going to be an exceptional night. It wasn't the subtlest I've ever heard them, and there were little rough spots, but the attitude they projected was "this is how we're going to do it tonight" in a way that gave the performances some edge (rather than seeming like flaws). There was an almost febrile intensity to everything they did; even the second song, "The Last Atlantic Wall," a slightly poppish one I'm not fond of, sounded strong; the somewhat similar "Royal Solitude" had been rewritten since the first time I've heard it, with a new, much more dissonant bridge which worked better. The sludgy "Yellow" and the Crimsonish "Messy Marvin" were their usual headbanging selves. "Something to Remember" is well-named, with its kind of waltzy quiet verses (in 7/4!) and its long, complex bridge. Like the best new songs, it's definitely in their style without sounding too much like their others; I think it's the finest song they've written since "Crime." The brand-new "Baptized" is a simple two-chord stop&start rocker with lead singer Dorit playing tasty lead guitar. And they finished with the strongest version of "Foam" the new rhythm section has played.

It was one of the two or three best shows I've ever seen them do.

Eve's Plum/The Hush/Handel

The Knitting Factory, Feb. 7th

I got to the Knitting Factory early enough to catch a set by Handel, whom the *Village Voice* described as "moody art rock, a cross between Kate Bush, Mary Margaret O'Hara, the Raincoats, and PJ Harvey." That's spinach. What they are is a kind of jazz band (much like The Hush who followed them). Imagine Pat Place of the Bush Tetras playing with the guitar setup of Brandon Ross (who often plays with Henry Threadgill), so that the sharp, staccato riffing becomes misty and sustained; that was Handel's guitarist (who even has a look similar to Pat Place) and bandleader. The bassist played wifty sotto voce fretless bass, and standup bass

later in the set. The drummer, who sometimes played with brushes, kept seductive jazzy dance beats going, to which another percussionist added bongo and conga accents. Over this the singer (who had a kind of baroque-soprano hairdo, the only reason I could see for their name) scatted and swooped in a largely improvisatory manner. It was a very "cool" kind of jazz, and passably well performed; it isn't really my style, but though the songs wore out their welcome a bit I wasn't bored. But I wasn't tempted to buy their CD either.

I'd already bought the Shanachie CD by the Hush (on some cue I can't recall), and found it mildly interesting, but not quite to my taste. They are, however, a really fine live band. Again, a bassist who plays funk/jazz lines, a drummer who keeps strong dance beats going. The guitarist is technically extraordinary, with a grasp of funk/jazz/blues styles that, to put it one way, makes him a candidate if the Red Hot Chili Peppers have more guitar trouble. The two female vocalists—one of whom played mostly one-handed keyboards that stayed out of the way when they weren't adding a nice accent in a couple songs—both have strong voices and nicely jazzy style. The interplay between them reminded me of nothing so much as Heart—the way that the voices are similar enough that one can have a hard time telling them apart (a good thing, actually), though the lead singer's voice has more power and edge, while the backup singer's is sweeter and smoother. The voices both blend well in harmony and answer each other in antiphony. And when they did a down&dirty jazz blues, the difference between this and the blues-based metal tendencies of an early Heart song like "Devil Delight" is a matter of fine definition. Throughout I really enjoyed the slight excess of the guitarist and the tasty interplay of the voices, and even a confirmed rocker like myself could not help but appreciate such sophisticated, strong, catchy jazz rhythms. And in fact when I listened to the album again the next day I enjoyed it much better than I had earlier.

Headliners Eve's Plum play simple, tight, slightly hard-edged pop, and lead singer Colleen somewhat resembles Debbie Harry vocally. (She also played Harry's daughter in John Waters' *Hairspray*, appropriately enough.) This particular night they were on for *over an hour*. They played the usual batch of songs from their OK new album *Cherry Alive*. They played the two very strong singles from their first album *Envy* ("I Want it All" and "Blue") which are always kickass highlights of their set. They played two early songs from singles that aren't on either of their albums. They played two brand-new songs, one OK and one really fine. And they played "Venus Meets Pluto," one of their best, a slow, hypnotic dance number (their "Heart of Glass," as it were). And they played two songs from *Envy* I've never heard them do before, their third fine single "Die Like Someone" (the first song of theirs I heard and still a favorite), and (oh bliss) the slow, brooding, building "Lovely You." For sheer amplitude and set list this may have been the best show I've ever seen them do, and the performances were *most* satisfactory.

Kittywinder

Mercury Lounge, Feb. 9
Khyber Pass (Philadelphia), Feb. 10

Mercury Lounge was very disorganized that night, and I stood around talking to members of Kittywinder while one of the other bands soundchecked, then stood around waiting some more while Kittywinder soundchecked, before they let *hoi polloi* in. And so much for the soundcheck; when Kittywinder's set began the lead singer's guitar was much too loud, and I did something I've never done before: between songs I leaned over the monitors and told her she should turn down. And had to do it again two songs later. Even then the balance was not ideal.

They've stopped playing anything from their fine EP, and I'm still getting used to the newer songs. Their terrific drummer has left the band, and their new drummer (who also plays with Sulfur) did a fine job; he's not as driving (meaning also not as overpowering), and has a nice subtle backbeat that adds something different to the band. The only song I could really compare was "Bats" from their single, where the C part is not as in-your-face as the recording, but it's still got plenty of kick, thank you. And his part on the very strong finale "Secret" (the one with the nice A-part arpeggio in harmonics) was the best aspect of the song.

Biggest kudos to a song called "Twinemaker," which begins with a nice guitar riff from the lead singer (whose guitar playing has markedly improved in the year I've been going to see them), but develops into two different sets of three-part counterpoint (two guitars and bass) later on, which utterly slew me.

The Dambuilders were headlining the show, but on my fourth night in a row out late, and with a terrible band in between, I decided to cut the evening short.

Nearly on the spur of the moment I decided to have an Adventure the following night. I hopped an evening bus for Philadelphia, and arrived at Khyber Pass, the club where I'd seen Grenadine and the Raymond Brake at Christmastime just over a year ago. That was in the tiny upstairs room (which closely resembles the AlterKnit here); this show was in the regular downstairs room, which has a stage about the size of Maxwell's in Hoboken, though the room is longer and narrow like the old Knitting Factory.

I'd come down to see Kittywinder again; yes, the band I'd just seen the night before. One way to put it is that I couldn't wait weeks to hear "Twinemaker" again. Almost the moment the band got over their pleased surprise at my enterprise, they offered me a ride back to New York after. When I got over my pleased surprise, I accepted with grateful alacrity.

After a routine Philly band called Emma at length finished their set, Kittywinder took the stage and began (as they had not the night before) with their instrumental "Alibi." And the sound was so much clearer, the two guitars and drums in so much better balance, their signature counterpoint so sweet, that I was pierced by a pang of purest pleasure.

The sound wasn't absolutely perfect; though on subsequent songs you could also hear the vocals far better, occasionally one of them, or one of the guitars, would get buried in the texture; but compared with the night before (and I've tended to think of Mercury Lounge as one of the better sound venues in New York), it was like night and day.

And I think the performance was better, too. Certainly "Bats," their fine new single, was more dead-on, the drum part stronger; the drummer's work in the finale "Secret" was again first-rate. It was probably the greater clarity that led me to notice that the third part of "Twinemaker" (it's another of their ABC-ABC songs) is really six-part counterpoint: the drums, two guitars, bass, and two voices each doing slightly different syncopations simultaneously. Vertiginous in the best sense.

(I do miss the second vocal in the latter half of the second section of "Bats," which on the recording is an important extra turn on the tension.)

There was not the edgy intensity of the overloud guitar from the night before (just as there is no longer the edgy intensity of the overinsistent previous drummer), but I'll take the trade, thank you. It was a much superior set which amply rewarded the trouble of my trip.

And that would have been the end of it; I would have had time after the set to hurry the eight blocks and catch the last bus back to New York...but because I had a ride I was able to stay and see headliners Walt Mink.

A sometime roommate of mine really likes Walt Mink, and used to play the title song from their first album *Miss Happiness* to death; it's a great song, no mistake, but I got tired of it at the time. And on the whole Walt Mink is an ordinary, straightahead rock'n'roll band—a really *good* one, mind, but their chords and chord sequences are the usual suspects, and after half a dozen songs I get tired of them. (I listened to their CDs both before and after the show, just to confirm my opinion.)

But they are a superlative live band.

In the van on the way back to New York, several of us were of the same mind: if Babe the blue OX were a conventional rock'n'roll band, they would probably sound like Walt Mink. There is that same almost terrifying drop-dead tightness, that same ability to project the song and make it sound utterly huge. Bass player Candice Belanoff and fairly new drummer Orestes Morfín are both strong and technically first-rate; guitarist John Kimbrough is extraordinary. All he plays are conventional major/minor chords and scales, but he plays them so blindingly fast (burying the chords in blurring flurries of grace notes) that I watched him with either a goofy grin on my face or else shaking my head in wonder. Or both. On one song he took a long solo (which he later apologized for the self-indulgence of) very much in the style of virtuoso solos past, but which are so out of fashion now (note for essay: this is not an era of guitar virtuosos) that it sounded almost fresh. It was terrific. And sledgehammer powerful. Left me hyperventilating.

Probably because it was the song I knew best, "Miss Happiness" was the highlight of the set. They play it faster than the recording, which has to be heard to be believed.

Let's be honest: they *aren't* Babe the blue OX, they *are* relatively conventional, and it seems clear that I'm never going to enjoy their recordings very much. But as a live band, with such clear sound continuing, they were an experience I was glad not to have missed. And I would certainly go see them again. [And did. Second verse the same as the first. *Again*, after his one long guitar solo, Kimbrough said something on the order of "Get used to it, guys, the guitar solo is coming back," less apologetic but still acknowledging how unusual such a thing is in the current climate.]

And afterwards I got to play roadie and help Kittywinder load and unload their van either end of a drive made short by pleasant company. It was a most successful Adventure, and a glimpse of the nuts and bolts of the rock'n'roll lifestyle that I found fascinating.

Ruby/Schtum

Mercury Lounge/February 22

Knowing how Mercury Lounge operates, I went down 24 hours early to buy a ticket for this label showcase (both bands are on Sony); in Ruby's case at least it was apparently their first American show. Had no trouble buying a ticket then, and by damn if the next night it wasn't sold out. It was an early show; doors opened at 7:30 and Schtum took the stage not unconscionably later. They are a Northern Irish band (and pronounce their band name exactly like Michael Palin-as-Luigi-Vercotti does in whatever Monty Python sketch that is, with the very clipped and closed vowel). As soon as they started I exclaimed in irritation and moved from slightly stage-left to slightly stage-right because, with the same setup as Kittywinder (2guitar-bass&drum) and a not-dissimilar texture (guitars and bass playing slightly different things and jumping in and out), they had exactly the same problem: the lead singer's guitar was too loud and/or the other guitar wasn't loud enough. Is Mercury Lounge deteriorating sonically? Schtum's drummer (who sets up sideways, who knows why) is strong and solid, their bass player has a knack for springy or rolling basslines, and the two guitarists tend to blaze into hard-strummed raveups, then break up into jumpy antiphony; of modest but fluent skill, they play pretty basic chords and riffs together and against one another. The lead singer, though he has a gruffer voice, has just a bit of early Bono plangency at the top of his range; but the band lacks the distinctiveness of even the earliest U2 (think of them, perhaps, as a Pearl Jam to U2's Nirvana). That is, Schtum is a moderately talented, energetic (their songs have a lot more punch live), and enjoyable band—a bit too normal for my taste—who could get popular, and no bad thing. I was entertained but not moved by their set.

I've been playing Ruby's *Salt peter* a lot—basically because it has three tremendous trip-hop songs, plus a bunch of others that range from pretty good to no better than OK; and since the best numbers are in the first half (tracks 1, 3, and 5), the album kind of dies for me halfway through. Seeing their first U.S. gig in a small club seemed too good an opportunity to miss, though I had a bit of foreboding when reading about an English gig and learning that they used tape to replicate some of the texture from the highly-produced studio album.

But I needn't have worried.

Since everything on the album was played by singer Lesley Rankine (ex-Silverfish) or her producer Mark Walk, the touring band is pickup/session musicians. Rankine got a good batch. First of all, the drummer is superb: he has that hesitation/syncopation backbeat so characteristic of trip-hop nailed to the wall, and is as relentless as any drum machine could be. The bassist is really excellent (despite a few moments where I couldn't hear him). At concert volume (and they weren't particularly loud, either), the sheer physical impact of this juggernaut rhythm section carried even songs I didn't much like on the album. And with Rankine's highly dramatic, highly sophisticated vocals over them (she's an outstanding performer), it almost didn't matter (as with Portishead) what went on in the middle; the woman who supplied keyboards, guitar, and backing vocals, and apparently triggered the tapes or samples (which in the event provided maybe 10% of the sound) did a fine job, though. In fact I don't think anyone in the band (including Rankine, who played noise guitar on two songs) missed a note all night. It was at the very least a most professional performance, and at times much more.

They started with two nonfavorites of mine, "Salt Water Fish" and "Swallow Baby," but already I was getting the idea that this was quite a performing unit. Then they started in on "Paraffin," the second single and one of my three favorites; at first I was hearing the drumbeat inside out, and it was still really strong; when the song really kicked in and the beat righted itself in my head, it levelled me. Almost unendurably good. And they followed immediately with "Flipping Tha Bird," my favorite, and it was if anything even better, an absolute monster (especially when the rhythm guitar entered), and tremendously thrilling when Rankine upped the ante on her vocal part and cranked up the expressivity a couple more notches. Wow.

That would have been enough; that was the high point of the set. They did do the quieter, even more ominous "Heidi" (the third of my favorites), with its uneasy acoustic guitar lick (played by the bassist) and thunderous drum inter-

jections. And they finished with "Tiny Meat," their first single (and the one I like most of the ones I like less), with the bassist playing fine rhythm electric guitar.

They basically did the album; leaving out only "Carondelet," the long album finale, which their set list had penciled in as an encore. But in the end they didn't do an encore.

In sum, I was glad I'd put the effort into getting into the show; it was a fine showcase.

Spoiler/Yuichi/Fluffer

Brownies, February 22nd

I arrived partway through the set by Fluffer, whom I'd been lukewarm on when I'd seen them in September. I stand by my earlier impression: good drummer, excellent bassist, OK singer who chooses a tuneless style, and two average guitarists. They did seem a little bit better this time, with a couple songs with interesting interplay among the strings; there's hope for the future. But their present is of limited interest.

Spoiler (who played last) are maybe a bit better than Fluffer, but they have the same problem: the good drummer and excellent bassist are much better than the guitar players. The latter are also the singers, which they did well enough; but they had their guitars drenched in effects (I don't think there was a clean guitar sound the whole set), and—particularly on two songs where the bassist played noise keyboard instead—they tended to dissolve into seemingly-random noise textures, and didn't have the chops to pull it off. The downside of a Sonic Youth influence. It reminded me of the more annoying moments of Swirlies shows, and for parts of the set I was fidgety with tedium. Some of the time they played straightforward chords (in blankets of effects), and with strong driving basslines those songs came off all right. But on the whole I wasn't terribly impressed.

The intervening band was Yuichi, about whom I knew exactly nothing. Guy on drums, three women playing 2guitars&bass. The first thing I thought of when they started up was Tsunami: a very similar sense of simple but effective guitar parts from their main guitarist (who sang lead much of the time), with a great deal of cloudy dissonance: often barre chords where the barre was shifted a fret closer to or farther away from the rest of the chord, blurring the harmony in a most savory fashion. Struck my ear right off. The bass player is very good, with a nice sense of what chromatic little riff will best set off what the guitarist is doing. The bass player is a fine singer herself, and sang a little less than half the leads. When searching for a comparison, I thought of the Bangles, where the confident guitarist sings a lot of the leads, quite well, with a pretty strong but fairly flat-timbred voice; but the more hesitant player with the richer, more expressive voice makes a stronger impression. I felt like the bass player was holding back a bit: like Margo Timmins of Cowboy Junkies she emphasized the quieter lower end of her range, and only at a few moments let loose and wailed at the top. The role of the other guitarist puzzled me a bit; about half the time she just played rhythm guitar and didn't seem to be contributing much to the sound; the other half her guitar part played off the other guitar and bass in an interesting way, and she sang second and third vocal parts; but both her voice and her guitar playing are pretty nondescript. I liked their sound a lot; one song in particular ended with a wonderful three-part vocal section, many had intricate interplay between guitar and bass (and some with the other guitar). A fine discovery, and I'll go see them again. They have an EP on the way.

In short, new discovery Yuichi was clearly the best band of the three.

[The rest of the story: I was so impressed with Yuichi that I went to see them several more times over the ensuing month or so, and continued enjoying their music a lot. Then they didn't play for a few weeks, and when I ran into the main guitarist at another show she told me the band had broken up. And the EP wasn't coming out after all. A serious disappointment. *Sic transit.*]

Polvo/Babe the blue OX/ Geezer Lake

Tuxedo's (Danbury, CT), February 25

Charles Ives might have been proud of this show in his hometown—three insistently dissonant rock bands. Tuxedo's in Danbury is kind of like Maxwell's in Hoboken: bar/restaurant out front, music space in the back. For some reason they weren't putting this show on the stage in back, but in a side alcove; it was a very reverberant space, which played havoc with the sound. In fact, the opening band, Geezer Lake (yet another North Carolina band), had the problem their entire set that the bass wiped out everyone else. Geezer Lake is a pretty interesting band: emphatic nasty guitar chording (sounding a bit tinny in this acoustic), strong basslines and drums, and the unusual color of a trumpet (the trumpeter also played second guitar on some songs, and trombone on one). There was another horn player the previous time I saw them, but he missed this gig. The problem with Geezer Lake is their meandering structures: they'd be better if they were tauter. They have a good vocabulary of interesting ideas.

The reason for this pilgrimage was to see Babe the blue OX. I hadn't seen them since New Year's Eve (what deprivation! a whole two months!), and had missed their last New York show due to a brain cramp; besides they're touring a lot now and playing New York less. They were in very strong form, and had better sound balance than Geezer Lake, turning the reverberance to their advantage: their huge sound was even huger.

They opened with the rousing "Can't Stand Up," which might be the single from their RCA album, and followed with an excellent new song called "Ready," with several increasingly raucous parts. Then the swamp-bluesy "9/10"; and you know, as I said to them afterwards, now that they don't play it every damned show, I can appreciate this unfavorite better; it was a terrific version, with the long wild instrumental in the middle being particularly lively.

So far so good; but then they did "Rube Goldberg," and, well, hearing them do that song live is one of my peak musical experiences, and as usual I could hardly stand up afterwards.

A rare performance of "Agent 6950," with its sweetly searing bridge/coda guitar passage, preceded a doubleplay from their neglected first album: the short scratchy "Chicken Head Bone Sucker" and the driving rock'n'roll of "Gymkhana."

After which Hanna called out from her drumset, "Hey, Don, how was the tempo tonight?" When I got over my startlement, I remembered that I'd complained in print that the doubletime riff in "Gymkhana" tends to drag tempo; tonight they'd played it a hair slower, and the distance between the main and doubled tempo was less. So I gave Hanna the "so-so" hand waggle, and she laughed.

Not much set was left; the strong ballad "Stand By Your Man," a particularly good version of "Tatoos," and "Ego Pimps" to close with a bang as usual. It was a very fine set, and a great pleasure to see them again.

During one of the intervals I went to the merchandise tables and bought a copy of Polvo's earliest EP (actually a CD rerelease of their first double single) for $8 (hadn't seen it elsewhere for less than $12) from guitarist Dave Brylawski himself. Listening to it later, it's worth hav-

ing, though probably for fans only; and I note that even the earliest Raymond Brake is better than the earliest Polvo, so watch out for those guys.

I was told by one musician that following Babe the blue OX is an awful experience; I think a band needs to be both very good and very confident to prevail in that situation. Polvo is both. I was already getting excited just listening to Ash Bowie tune and test his guitar. They were perhaps not quite as sharp as they'd been at Brownies last year, and particularly with the example of Geezer Lake (and the counterexample of Babe the blue OX) I was aware of their somewhat loose song structures (and on the song or two I knew well it was clear that they were stretching out and improvising a little bit), but I didn't really care: my ear was awash in glorious dissonance. A friend I went with said afterwards that his brain prefers a little more balance between dissonance and consonance, but agreed that Polvo is obviously doing exactly what they intend.

Bowie and Brylawski are not virtuosos, but they have invented a genuinely new musical language (which they both play), a guitar style where bends and glissandos are rife and used in a way very different from the typical way they occur in blues and rock styles. It amazed me to realize that Brylawski is doing this in standard tuning; Bowie (as he admitted in a magazine article) uses really weird tunings.

The highlight of the night, and (I'm coming to think) their best song, was "Every Holy Shroud," from which the title line of their EP *Celebrate the Dark Age* comes. The sour-sweet opening/closing theme (with its jackhammer cadence chord), the queasy quiet interlude (which turns loud and driving), the insistently stiff rhythmic vocal...it's one of their tightest structures (though they played it a bit loose that night, as I said), and makes a very strong impression.

I ended up being very glad I'd made the trip.

Elysian Fields

Mercury Lounge, March 18
Fez, March 27

I wangled my way into this Radioactive Records showcase for the Lower East Side soft jazz group led by several avant rockers, and boy, was it worth it. They only did *one* song from their EP, "Star"; the other eight were all new to me, and maintained the quality of the EP very well. And singer Jennifer Charles sounds just as good, if not better, live than she does on record, and the band plays a style well within their talents quite effortlessly. Charles seems quite shy and a bit nervous as a performer, but still puts herself across well; you certainly can't *hear* her nervousness in her voice. Probably my two favorites were the two Oren Bloedow played on nylon-string guitar (with light or no accompaniment): "Mermaid" (with Charles' most bravura vocal turns in the chorus) and "Salome" (during the instrumental coda of which Charles actually did a little dance, more bellydancing hand-moves than shimmying, but quite charming). But I thoroughly enjoyed all of the songs; it was a very tasty set, and I was very glad I'd gotten in to see it.

As luck would have it, they played another show a couple weeks later, and again they did a nine-song set, repeating only "Star" and one other song, meaning they have at *least* fifteen songs in addition to the EP, and they went off to Minnesota to record an album only days later.

Rasputina

The Cooler, April 5

It was crowded for Rasputina, whom I'd heard good things about; in order to see I ended up standing on half a chair and bracing myself on the overhead pipes.

Rasputina consists of three women cellists (they have a drummer, but he sits out at least a third of the songs and seems optional at best) dressed in Victorian gowns. The cello music was layered figuration, not always counterpoint, that at times reminded me of Baroque music and at other times of contemporary minimalism (one song particularly reminded me of Terry Riley's *G Song*, one of the string quartets he wrote for Kronos, which itself is based on the Am-G-F-E chord sequence which has been popular since the early Baroque); they had a talent for bringing a typical Baroque closing cadence in as a surprise ending which worked very well.

I found myself thinking, "This is what Philip Glass' song album should have sounded like." But it's probably fairer to say that Rasputina's music just suits my taste better.

Some of the pieces were middling fast and vigorous; others slow and langorous. One cello player sang, in a manner similar to what I call "Goth lite": bands like the Cocteau Twins or Dead Can Dance. She also had bizarre introductions to most of the songs, which reminded me of nothing so much as the anecdotes Peter Gabriel used to tell when he was with Genesis. For one song she began, "Since we were little girls we've dreamed of being in a cello bands; we used to go see our favorite cello bands, like" and ra tled off several funny band names, one c which sounded like the name of a blues singer.

The truth is that neither thee nor me has ever seen a band quite like Rasputina. I'd go see them again with lit tle provocation.

Sleater-Kinney

Meow Mix, April 12
Mercury Lounge, April 14
West End Gate, April 15

This is how rock'n'roll should be.

With very pleasant synchronicity, not two weeks after I first heard (and wa knocked over by) Sleater-Kinney, they showed up in New York, playing three gigs at three different venues over four nights. Glutton that I am, I went to all three.

The first was at a tiny lesbian bar called Meow Mix, which is almost too small to have a stage; but there it is alon the back wall, with a railing at the front of it that both bands commented made them feel like they were kids performing on the front porch.

Opening was a "group" called Spook Engine, which is basically a vehicle for performer Jane Hohenberger. As she was about to go on, I realized that she looked familiar, but I couldn't place her; but as soon as she began I remembered: she was the singer/poetess who had cameoed with Vitapup back in January. She did two or three songs a cappella, two or three with a bass player and saxophonist, two or three with guitarbass&drum (a different, female bass player), and two or three with a third bass player (probably the best of the three) with the same drummer. She has a fine, bluesy/jazzy voice and a talent for Beatlike poetry (which she sometimes recites and sometimes sings), but she has such a flaky, performance-artist affect that, combined with the scattered effect of so many different backing textures, it distracts from appreciating her talent.

(Let's wonder for a minute what I might have thought of Patti Smith in 1974, and without suggesting that Jane Hohenberger is of that stature, let me disqualify myself just a little from trying to judge a style I'm neither familiar with nor sympathetic to.)

Then Sleater-Kinney took the stage Their music is so angry that I half-expected them to be kind of dour, but they were actually quite cheerful and even playful: while waiting for a last-minute mike problem to be solved, they goofed around with blues and rock'n'roll

riffs, serving notice that their stripped-down style is an aesthetic choice, not a consequence of limited chops.

(Come clean, says a Voice from the Audience. OK: when a performer exhibits limited technique —PJ Harvey, for example—I do take note of it, but I never use the fact as a judgment. I know that, especially in rock'n'roll, sophisticated technique does not go hand in hand with imaginative musicianship—in fact, sometimes they seem mutually exclusive. But though I don't judge a performer by level of technique, I do assume that the technique exhibited is all the technique available, which as this example proves is not a safe assumption at all. The mother of invention is not *always* necessity.)

And then they took off with a roar. Is new drummer Toni Gogin better than erstwhile Australian Lora McFarlane? Hard to say, but live she has an absolutely vicious backbeat, and combined with the loudly thrumming guitar chording from Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein, they had astounding rhythmic power; and when they dropped into quieter dissonant guitar licks against one another, it killed me even more. If my favorite song, the hard-edged minutelong gem "A Real Man," was the high point of the set, it wasn't by much; there wasn't a song that didn't have me moving, really hard, right up to the fun, rousing final number "I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone" and the encore. I was actually glad that with the bar now so packed that I was crowded further up front (close enough to be in danger of being conked in the face by the neck of Brownstein's guitar) and had the "porch" railing to hang onto between songs. The drawback was that I was out of the path of the P.A., and none of the vocals (not even Tucker's cutting upper range) were very audible. But bathing in the searing energy emanating from the band was plenty to keep me busy.

Two nights later Sleater-Kinney's most visible New York appearance took place at Mercury Lounge. I arrived during the set by the Yips, a woman playing electric guitar along with a drummer. The first couple songs were all barre chords, in a vigorous stripped-down style that was a good billmate for Sleater-Kinney, and I realized that what makes this particular kind of music work is rhythm: nothing fancy, good solid 4/4 with clean incisive beats and just enough backbeat and syncopation to keep the ear interested. As the set wore on her guitar work got more and more interesting: for one instrumental she put the pick between her teeth and plucked two widely-separated strings per note. It was imaginative and quite fascinating, the kind of thing that made this guitarist say to myself "why didn't I think of that?" The next-to-last song was a long series of chord sequences, mostly a little dissonant but still logical, changing every sixteen bars or so, speeding up a little, slowing down a little (as several other songs had), while she sang rather tunelessly (or with a melody not related to the key she was playing in) but compellingly. I was favorably impressed.

I had decided to correct the one drawback of the previous Sleater-Kinney set I'd seen and stand a little bit farther back so I could hear the vocals in the P.A. I succeeded, and the vocal interplay (particularly on the excellent "The Day I Went Away" from the EP) was worth savoring; but the tradeoff was that, even less than fifteen feet from the stage, they were noticeably less intense: they were playing just as hard (I noticed as I hadn't the last time that Tucker's face gets quite red when she sings/yells), but the sound was not extremely loud.

The third show was at the West End Gate, a restaurant/bar on the Barnard campus, in a little brick-lined cellar maybe a little bit bigger than Meow Mix (but not much). I arrived near the end of the set of a group called Mad Planets, who were shouting lyrics about female liberation (singing melodies seems to have gone out of fashion in this style of music; that's not a criticism) over simple punky garage rock. They were followed by the last performance of a group called Sayet Nova, featuring drummer, guitarist, and vocalist who "sang" in Armenian. Actually, she chanted in muezzin-like short phrases that tended to stay on one or two pitches while the guitarist produced a profusion of riffs that swung between the poles of melodic straight rock and slightly more dissonant metal. It was a very odd combination, and I think it's significant that the new song the vocalist had never heard before sounded the same as the rest. And the love song was darker and more dissonant than the ones about rape and genocide. Not the sort of music you hear every day; intriguing though only middlingly successful.

Then Sleater-Kinney. I was up close again, and the intensity was about in between the previous two sets. Could hear Tucker's cutting voice OK, couldn't hear Brownstein's quieter voice as well. They did fewer of the songs I really like, and the sound was a little muddy and distorted, so it wasn't as strong as the first set, but (as had happened at Mercury Lounge too) there were moments when I just closed my eyes and grooved strongly to the sound.

Three distinct experiences, contoured by the environment and my my expectations and attitude, any one of which would have been enough.

And by the way, the money I spent on all three shows combined would have bought me one ticket to Roseland or Irving Plaza to see a bigger band. That's how rock'n'roll should be too.

Elliott Sharp/Orchestra Carbon

Knitting Factory, April 18th

Elliott Sharp plays around New York a lot in a variety of configurations; but apart from seeing his blues trio Terraplane two years ago, I have not availed myself of this musical resource, nor have I kept up with his many recordings; so I was a significantly uninformed audience for this peformance.

Sharp seems to play most frequently with his avant quartet Carbon, which also features Zeena Parkins, the electric harpist who has herself played with a number of of avant-garde rockers; I first encountered her work a decade ago on the second Skeleton Crew album with guitarist Fred Frith and cellist Tom Cora. The rest of the group consists of bassist Marc Sloan, drummer Joseph Trump, and sampler keyboardist David Weinstein. The ensemble this night was termed Orchestra Carbon, and besides Parkins on keyboard and harp and Sharp on guitar and conducting it featured the rest of the quartet (I couldn't see the bassist, so I don't know if he was playing electric or standup), two bass clarinets, and the Soldier String Quartet. It was hard to tell what if anything (besides guitar and harp and probably the keyboards) was amplified, but the sound was more like a classical concert than a rock show.

The single piece lasted close to an hour, and resembled pop/minimal classical music more than it resembled avant-garde rock. The first texture featured the string quartet playing something like minimalist Bartók (interlocking dissonant figures) over a steady beat on the drums while the bass clarinets played Xenakis-like sustained pitches over top. (I couldn't be sure I was hearing bass or either keyboard at this time or any other time; the Knitting Factory isn't really the best venue for this kind of thing.) Parkins played keyboard while Sharp conducted. This texture went on, without much audible change, for quite a few minutes. There were a number of other sections which were strikingly different in texture while being in the same general stylistic orbit.

There was a break early in the piece where Parkins played (for the only time in the piece) what sounded like an improvised electric harp solo. It's an amazing instrument; I examined it from closer up after the performance, and it looks handmade: a stark triangle made of ordinary wood, bristling with electronics plugs and devices. And Parkins (whom I'd never seen perform before) is an amazing player. The instrument has sustain, sound-altering, and pitch-bending capabilities, and she got from it thereminlike and gamelanlike sounds in the higher pitches, and a striking whooshing roar from the lower pitches. I found myself lost in slackjawed amazement at the sounds she was producing, and hardly noticing that it was a pretty unstructured improvisation. (I had a similar experience when I went back and listened to a friend's copy of Parkins' solo album *Nightmare Alley* afterward.) I wondered as I listened what composers like Birtwistle and Maxwell Davies (who have made good use of the harp in their work) would do with such a harp—or such a harpist!

Later in the piece Sharp took a cadenza on solo electric guitar, unfortunately with his back to the audience, so one could only admire the fluid ease of his playing style without being able to see exactly what he was doing. Sharp is a remarkable guitar player and no mean composer, and though this piece was rather a large meal to make much of on one encounter, it continued the thought that I ought to pay more attention to a local perennial.

Liquorice/Ida/Danielle Howle/ The Raymond Brake

Brownies, April 21st

The opening band this particular night was The Raymond Brake, favored noisemeisters of mine, and it was pleasant to know many of the songs from the now-out album. They started with "Shooting in the Dark," whose bend&harmonic opening riff cut right through me; it builds to quite a din at the end. When guitarist Ryan broke a string midway through, the rest of the band did their quiet country song "The Long Sleep." "Slink Moss" ' driving 3-time was a highlight, as was "Laying Down," which starts with a lazy riff but builds to an instrumental break of pound-six-times-and stop that pounded me into submission. They are louder, messier, and much stronger live; I always enjoy watching them.

This was the fifth time I've seen Danielle Howle on Simple Machines bills, and starting from not liking her much at all, each time I've seen her I've appreciated her fine voice and sturdy songs a bit more. Her newer ones, too, seem more intricate and more adventurous; one, called "China Patterns" (which she said, "I play that sucky," though apart from a little buzzing she played well enough) was extremely interesting, and there were a couple more nearly as fine. And she really is a stitch in between (and sometimes during) songs.

Ida had a violin and cello with them, and a bassplayer as well (Fred from Trenchmouth), turning their original duo three times its size. (Though there were times that Dan Littleton's guitar carried the whole song.) They opened with "F. Boyfriend" from their first album, a favorite of mine; shortly after they played "Truxton Park," the new song they'd opened with last time; and again it floored me. It's extraordinarly quiet, even for them, and just heartbreakingly beautiful; one of their best songs. They also did "Shotgun," a highlight of the first album, and at least two ("Downtown" and "Treasure Chest") from their just-released second album. Drummer Mickey played guitar on one song, bass on a couple (with Fred on drums), drums on most, and even accordian on one song where the strings really shone. And they closed with Liz playing bass on "Raspberry Beret." Once again a really lovely set.

Headlining was Liquorice, with Dan Littleton and Jenny Toomey; they didn't have a drummer this time, turning them, curiously, into an original-Idalike guitar duo. The songs, which on previous live sets had been more energetic than the studio recordings, were this time less: quieter, subtler, more underplayed. It worked quite well, even on songs like "Trump Suit" and the magisterial "Stalls" where I'd loved the bravura versions. While Littleton changed a string Toomey sang a new "Grenadiney" (i.e. like her other other band) song solo: a dead archetypal Jenny Toomey song, simple but interesting chords (all the same shape slid up and down), beautiful melody most expressively sung, and sharp, sharp lyrics.

I want to put in a word here for Dan Littleton's guitar playing. I was even more impressed this particular evening than all the other many times I've seen him play. It wasn't just the breaking into an impromptu minute of Hendrix' "Foxy Lady," or illustrating Jenny Toomey's between-songs story of how he'd figured out "Reeling In the Years" on the spot; he plays so understatedly and tastefully that it's easy to miss just how effortlessly and within himself he plays, and how you never hear him play a wrong note, or an ugly note, or strain for effect. I noticed particularly at one point where there was an intricate little figure that he and Toomey were playing in unison; she is not a great guitar player, but she could play the figure just fine, though you could tell it was at the edge of her confidence level. Littleton, on the other hand, not only played it without any strain, he added another little fillip to it, then changed it to an even more intricate figure that dovetailed perfectly with the original.

It's always a pleasure to see Toomey play; she's a talent too little-known. And Ida deserves more attention than I think to give them. And the Raymond Brake continues to be one of my favorite bands.

Babe the blue OX/Suck Pretty

Westbeth Music Theatre, April 24th

This performance was a benefit for Circus Amok, a small circus that goes into New York City parks and gives free shows. The opening band was Suck Pretty, the new project of Chris Cochrane, guitarist of the now-broken up avant-rock group No Safety (which included electric harpist Zeena Parkins). This trio, however, plays relatively straightforward rock'n'roll songs, with edgy little guitar licks. As the set went on the songs got bluesier and nastier, which suited Cochrane's crabbed and snarly voice better, and with the little jazz and funk touches made them seem a good choice to open for Babe the blue OX, much like Elliott Sharp's Terraplane blues trio had two years ago.

Then Circus Amok did a short presentation, with a fireater, escape artist in straitjacket and chains, lariatist, and two acrobats all performing simultaneously.

Babe the blue OX began their set with a pretty good version of the opener for their new album *People*, the chugging, swampy "Can't Stand Up." As they prepared to play a new song, something went wrong with Rose's bass, and they had to pause while, eventually, she borrowed the previous band's bass amp.

I'll take the interval to note that the sound at Westbeth, historically terrible, seems to have improved somewhat; they have four overhead PA speakers now, which seems to help. It was pretty good this night, while still a bit problematical when I'd been there the previous week.

While Rose was still struggling with her technical difficulty, Tim and Hanna began goofing around with a little bluesy riff. And in that slightly more exposed context, I found myself listening more closely than usual to Hanna's drumming. I'm a guitar player myself, and so I watch what Tim and Rose do quite closely, and not being a drummer I neither watch as much nor understand as clearly what I do

see of what Hanna is doing. But at this particular moment I was saying to myself, Listen to that. Listen to how crisp, and tight, and dead on the mark she is. Listen to how much impact the smallest change in the pattern has with such a relentlessly solid basis. The drum part alone had me bopping along to it, really strongly. Subliminally I've been aware that Hanna is a great drummer, but this little interlude really brought it home to me. Babe the blue OX is a great band because of the near-telepathic interlock of its three musicians; but the technical skill and sheer rhythmic power of Hannah's playing make her a more equal partner than most drummers. (For a counterexample, listen to the Red Hot Chili Peppers sometime, and you'll hear drumming that is, well, rather pedestrian by comparison with, say, the bass playing.)

They started up again with two new songs, one called "Basketball," which has a nice funky main riff and coda and a lovely bassline descending against a persistent pitch in the bridge, and "Bette Davis," which began with a tasty jazz intro and then went into a really strong rock'n'roll stomp. Then "Stand By Your Man," one of their sad but loud ballads, and possibly their next single; "Family Picnic," uptempo funky with a superbly driving bridge/coda; and the only song from the first two CDs, "Agent 6950."

And then it was time for "Rube Goldberg." It's hard to express how swell it is to be able to play that song whenever I want to, now that the album is out; it used to be that I could only hear the song when I went to shows, and I knew that I wasn't going to be able to predict the wild fills all three musicians throw into the bouncy first verse; now, however, I've listened enough to the recording that at least subconsciously I've registered the fills as they are there. This had the interesting effect of making the very different live fills even *more* powerful because they were *contradicting* my expectations. And even more unpredictable is just how, after the excrutiatingly huge tension of the long buildup in the middle, the song is going to explode into pieces at the recapitulation. Well, in short, hearing the song live again was so physically convulsive that it damn near crippled me. It's into another dimension.

They followed with the fine "Beat You To It," which is a good compromise between the sweeter harmony of their ballads and the upbeat rhythmic style of their fiercer songs. Then they did a batch of quiet songs, Rose's sad and sweet "Resumé" plus "Memphis" (with lovely ringing harmonics: I hadn't realized one could get such high harmonics from a bass, but Rose plays harmonics better than any bassist I can remember) and "I'm Wrong" (all from the new album) and closed, as usual, with a ferocious "Ego Pimps."

It's become a rarer pleasure to see my favorite live band, and it was a very keen one this night.

Archers of Loaf/Tuscadero

Eisner & Lubin Auditorium, April 25th

When I walked into this space on the NYU campus, I said to myself, it's huge! It's a school auditorium, so it's bigger than your basic average club; probably nearly as big as Irving Plaza. And it was quite crowded, especially up near the stage.

The opening band was Tuscadero, whom I had seen and enjoyed at Brownies last year. Same setup as Veruca Salt (two women guitarist/singers, two guys on bass&drums), and a similar sound, but with more of a sense of fun: song titles like "Holidays R Hell" (a driving, slightly ominous song that is my favorite—I was glad to hear it, they didn't do it last time) and "Hollywood Handsome" (the show closer). The odd thing about them is their almost lackadaisical stage demeanor: Margaret McCartney's attitude is calm unconcern, Melissa Farris' gum-chewing boredom. But the sound they produce is tight, economical, and quite strong (they sounded more energetic when I closed my eyes than they did when I was watching them). Farris in particular can really wail when she puts her mind to it. I note that both of them have caught a case of the yips, that hiccuping little catch particularly characteristic of country music but common in pop music for a long time as well. It's a tic that can be overdone.

They only played two or three songs I recognized, and quite a few new ones which (with the exception of the somewhat monotonous "Temper Temper") sounded quite up to their usual. They're a very good band, and I was pleased for them when I discovered afterwards that they've been signed to Elektra (their album and EP are on TeenBeat).

The headliners were Archers of Loaf, who come with a considerable reputation (they are Robert Christgau's favorite indie band), one of those Carolina bands like Pavement or Superchunk or Polvo. I'm not familiar with their work, and I was looking forward to giving them a try. Right off the bat they manifested more physical energy than Tuscadero, especially the bassist who had a bad case of Flea-seizures.

But after two songs they had done absolutely nothing for me, and I actually thought seriously about leaving. In the event I stuck it out through the set to give them a fair shake, but without much improvement.

Are they too major? Not really; but the chord sequences are so conventional that I found them bland. Are they at all dissonant? Here and there; but it's for a few bars in the introduction, or a few bars in the instrumental break. Never during vocal parts, which were all normal chords. Are their rhythms monotonous? Quite likely; straight 4/4 with strumming on the quarter notes seemed the order of the night.

But I'm not sure. I think they're an OK band, and the crowd was getting into them (so it wasn't a case of a bad performance). I'm sure that the hype they came lumbered with had a bit to do with it, but I would have settled for enjoying them mildly even if I wasn't knocked over, but to have them leave me absolutely dead cold surprised and disappointed me.

[Footnote: It turns out that both their singles collection *The Speed of Cattle* and their most recent album *Vee Vee* are much more interesting than I remember the concert being: complicated and dissonant. The mystery continues.]

Poe/Bandit Queen

Mercury Lounge, April 30th

Poe is a singer/songwriter whose first album *Hello*, with its trip-hop elements and strong songs, had struck my ear much like Ruby's *Salt peter* had a few months earlier. Bandit Queen's album *Hormone Hotel* is very good, slightly hard-edged Britpop in the vein of Sleeper and Elastica. It seemed a strong double bill at the same venue where I had earlier seen Ruby and Schtum. Both bands, however, turned out to be quite different from what I expected.

I arrived just as Bandit Queen was starting, to discover that they're pretty much a straightahead rock'n'roll band live. Guitarist Tracy Gooding gets a lot of mileage out of playing fairly simple riffs and leads with great energy. They rocked. One song faintly resembled Nirvana not only in the way it used soft-to-loud dynamics but in its use of Nirvana's characteristic minor-third progressions. About half the songs they did came from the album; I assume the rest were newer. It was an enjoyable set, even more so than Schtum had been before Ruby.

For singer/songwriter Poe I found myself just about exactly the same spot right up front as I'd been in for Ruby, and combined with the fact that they were actually playing Ruby over the sound system, I was expecting the same kind of slightly techno-y show. I was a bit startled

to observe that there were no keyboards in Poe's band, just a guitarist (with a huge rack of effects), bassist, drummer, and cellist—a guy this time (also with a few effects). The show began with "That Day," featuring just Poe and the cellist (which was very nicely done). Then they went into the more rocking "Choking the Cherry," where Poe's almost hyperactive stage presence came into play: she bounced around the stage during instrumental breaks, made wild hand gestures, chopping off the song at the end. I don't think her vocal performance surpasses the recording in any way, but she sang very well.

The next song was "Hello," my favorite and the most trip-hoppy song on the disc. It was true throughout the set, but truest here, that the live versions emphasized the more rock-y, bluesy, even jazzy elements of her music, and downplaying the more funky, soulish, hip-hoppy elements; to the point where it sometimes sounded like a really ace bar band doing Poe covers. (That's not really a criticism.) "Hello" ended up sounding almost like boogie-blues, and no I couldn't have imagined that if I hadn't actually heard it. It was pretty good, but...really different.

The climax of the set was two of her best songs, "Angry Johnny" and "Trigger Happy Jack," done back to back, and here the considerable energy of the set became even greater. A spectacular ending.

I think it was as an encore that she did a brand-new song called "How Long," which began with ticking-clock pizzicato on the cello, and was a most effective gloomy ballad about recovering from a broken relationship. She's a very good songwriter with a knack for memorable melody.

So although bemusing because it was not what I expected, it was still a quite satisfying evening of music.

Happy Rhodes

Tin Angel (Philadelphia, PA), May 10th

reviewed by Meredith Tarr

Happy Rhodes is one of the best singers and songwriters you've never heard of. Over the past ten years, this 30-year-old from upstate New York has produced seven full-length albums and two compilations on the tiny independent Aural Gratification label, and amassed an improbably large following around the world thanks almost entirely to the Internet (though nationwide airplay on the Public Radio International shows World Cafe and Echoes hasn't hurt, either). Her four-octave vocal range has elicited apt comparisons to Kate Bush and Annie Lennox singing a duet; combined with lush, increasingly electronic musical arrangements and lyrics inspired by her emotionally trying childhood and fascination with aliens and other fantastical elements, Happy's music, once discovered, is quite difficult to ignore.

Considering all this, it is a shame that there have been so few opportunities to see Happy perform live over the course of her career. She's done fewer than a dozen gigs since her first real live shows, which followed up on the surprise success of the song "Feed The Fire" at WXPN in Philadelphia, where it was the most-requested song of 1991 and led to a sold-out performance at the University of Pennsylvania in March of 1992. Since then Philly has continued to be Happy's performance home away from home, and on May 9 and 10 she packed them in at the intimate Tin Angel for four sold-out shows, the final one of which I attended.

Opening was local neo-folkie-type singer/songwriter Jen Hess, who delivered a grudgingly uninspired and uninspiring set, though she was accompanied by one of the most amazing musicians I've ever seen, an electric-cello player named Hotch. Hopefully he'll ditch the Jen Hess gig and go off on his own: he certainly deserves to become a household name, and soon.

Then Happy and her backing band, guitarist/coproducer/partner/ record label president Kevin Bartlett and bassist Carl Adami took the stage, opening with the perennial favorite "Words Weren't Made For Cowards" (from her fifth album *Warpaint*). Despite having completed three shows in two days with a set list specifically designed to showcase her full vocal ability, Happy's voice was in fine form, soaring from the top to the bottom of her register with no discernible effort. She dipped into her sizable back catalog, surprising us with reworkings of "Take Me With You" (from her second album *Rhodes II*) and "The Issue Is" (from her third album *Rearmament*), for which she went into the audience to record a random answer to the question "What is your fondest memory?": thanks to the wonders of MIDI technology, the phrase "fields of Greece as a little boy" thus became an intermittent rhythm track interspersed throughout the song. She came back closer to the present with a vaguely Latin-ized version of "Collective Heart" from her latest album *Building The Colossus* and a dreamy take on "Save Our Souls" (from her sixth album *Equipoise*) then headed back to *Warpaint* for the very Kate Bush-like "Lay Me Down." Next she paid tribute to one of her biggest influences, Freddie Mercury, with his "Lily of the Valley," which she segued perfectly into my all-time favorite, "Possessed," from her first album *Rhodes I*.

After this foray into the past it was time to debut a brand-new song, as yet untitled (though she said something about calling it "Jork"). Partly as a result of her work on the two ambient compilations Aural Gratification released at the end of last year, her new material is very ambient/techno infused, yet it is no less interesting for all of that. Rumor has it that this particular song will be done completely with vocal tracks for instrumentation; if that's indicative of how the rest of the project is going to turn out, I'd advise each and every one of you to place your orders now.

The second half of the show featured more older material, as well as a surprise "When The Rain Came Down," which was recorded in 1988 and released as a "bonus track" on the CD reissue of her fourth album *Ecto*, but had never before been performed live. She closed the set with a stunning cover of Peter Gabriel's "Here Comes The Flood" and an acoustic version of "Hold Me" (from *Building The Colossus*), which hasn't really worked for me in a live setting, but came off better here than in the past.

The entire performance was distinguished by superb musicianship, and of course Happy's amazing voice. Kevin Bartlett managed to coax enough sound out of his guitar to make it seem as though seven or eight musicians were up on the stage, and Carl Adami, who has been playing with Happy for a couple of years now, is an exceptional bass player. I have seen these three with a drummer, keyboardist, and backing vocalist added, and while the full-band shows have been powerhouses, this simple trio works better in a small-venue context (the Tin Angel is about the size of the old Knitting Factory). With luck these three will decide it was enough fun to do all over again, and maybe they will even dare venture further afield...perhaps back to the Bottom Line, where Happy was part of the second Required Listening show last February, her one and only New York appearance thus far.

In the meantime, do stop by Tower and pick up any and all Happy Rhodes albums you can find. If Kate Bush, Peter Gabriel, Yes and the like are your thing, chances are you won't be disappointed. Ten years is a long time to wait to be discovered, and Happy's time is long overdue.

Tori Amos

The Palace (New Haven, CT), May 11th

reviewed by Meredith Tarr

When Tori Amos first sneaked onto the scene in early 1992 with the brilliant *Little Earthquakes*, the buzz was almost more about her live performances than her brutally frank lyrics and rebelliously artistic videos. She was just a girl with a piano, traversing the globe to shock some audience members with her bench-humping playing style and enchant all who had the privilege of watching—and hearing—her weave the musical spell that left all in the room breathless, unable to as much as move until she saw fit to release us as she left the stage. We hadn't seen or heard anything quite like her before, and we all knew that we were witnessing the beginning of something wonderful, hoping that she'd get the recognition she deserved even as we wished we could keep her to ourselves and see her at the Bottom Line every week for the rest of our lives.

Now it's 1996, and Tori certainly has gotten her recognition: she's got multi-platinum sales figures for *Little Earthquakes*, its followup *Under the Pink*, and her new masterwork *Boys For Pele* under her belt, the distinction(!) of being named one of the "50 most beautiful people in the world" by *People* magazine, and multiple-night sold-out stands across North America in large venues such as The Theater At Madison Square Garden. We've resigned ourselves to the knowledge that at every Tori show we'll be surrounded by screaming high-school fans and their bewildered boyfriends, and we surrender our tickets at the door fervently praying that the magic will return for just one more night, so we won't have to endure shouts of "I love you Tori!" in the middle of song intros and screeches of adoration during particularly adept instrumental or vocal moments. More often than not this has become a vain hope: however, in 200+ shows there's always going to be a chance that the magic won't be able to stay away, and if you're lucky, you'll be in the audience when it comes rushing back.

On May 11, Tori performed two sold-out shows at the Palace Theater in New Haven, CT, quite possibly the smallest venue of the entire Dew Drop Inn Tour. While the early show was good, the followup took us all completely by surprise, and even now I can't quite believe that it actually happened.

For the first time, on this tour Tori isn't alone on stage: Steve Caton, guitarist for Y Kant Tori Read and session musician on all of Tori's solo albums to date, is an excellent addition. His guitar textures add just enough to the songs while keeping Tori's music firmly in the foreground, and he knows her and her music well enough to be able to improvise along with whatever she's doing at the time. It would be wonderful to see her add more musicians to her stage lineup: not a band per se, but a collection of instrumentalists who could add whatever they could when appropriate, perhaps a percussionist and a violinist and/or cellist.

Tori's voice, this early on in the tour, is in fine form. She's singing out more than on the record, and she never ceases to amaze with her sheer vocal power. One hopes she can keep it up: that sort of thing can do damage after a long period of time.The audience was impressively respectful: they were very vocal in their appreciation in between songs, yet quieted down pretty quickly once the next song began. There were only a few outbursts, ranging from the amusing "Tori, I dreamed I was your cat!" to the most egregious of the entire night, a female shout of "I want you!" during the first line of "Me And A Gun," after which Tori managed to silence the resulting angry murmur that swelled through the crowd with a simple motion of her hand without skipping a beat, and went on.

"Father Lucifer," one of my favorites from the new album, simply blew me away: she did all three bridges in consecutive order, not layered on top of one another like in the studio version, interspersed some bits of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* (used as the theme to *The Exorcist*), and ending with the "run away turn away run away turn away run away" mantra from Bronski Beat's classic "Smalltown Boy" (though that part, like the similarity to "Purple Rain" in "Hey Jupiter," may be officially unintentional).

I cannot adequately describe just how well all this worked, but it was a stroke of brilliance in an otherwise uninspired and uninspiring performance, relatively speaking. (Even a bad Tori Amos show is light-years better than a good day on Michael Bolton's current tour.) Tori seemed a bit down, and didn't talk at all save for a really bizarre preamble to "Bells For Her" that I didn't quite parse, and a quick introduction of "Caton," as she calls him. After it was over, as we made our way out into the pouring rain to get in line for the second show, I found myself worrying that maybe the criticisms I've seen are correct: maybe Tori has lost some of the honesty and intimacy that have made her live shows so special in the past, and maybe with the size of her venues growing exponentially with each passing year she has lost the ability to ensorcel entire audiences into rapt attention by just playing one note.

I don't know what she did or ate or took or whatever during the intermission, but a different Tori came out on stage the second time around. She had changed into a blue version of the jumpsuit she had worn earlier, and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. After starting as usual with "Beauty Queen/Horses," dusting off "Leather" and serving up a snarling "Blood Roses" on the harpsichord, she took a break from the proceedings to let us all in on the war her sound and light technicians were waging involving seven little plastic dwarf dolls, before launching into a smoky version of "Little Amsterdam" that placed great emphasis on the lines, "Father only you can save my soul/and playing that organ must count for something."

She and Caton jammed more on "Cornflake Girl" and especially during "In The Springtime of his Voodoo" (which she introduced by starting the keyboard vamp and declaring, "Girls, mount your bulls!"). I was in shock when I heard the first strains of the old b-side "Upside Down," when "Little Earthquakes" followed it up the shock deepened, and when she turned to her harpsichord and whispered, "Some of you may know this one—I used to listen to it really loud while driving down the freeway in L.A." and did The Cure's "Lovesong" I went into another place, convinced the show couldn't get any better than this.

But then she had to go and play "Baker Baker" right after "Me And A Gun," which utterly destroyed me the first time I saw her juxtapose the two and affected me no less deeply this time around, and completely blow her brilliant studio version of Leonard Cohen's "Famous Blue Raincoat" out of the water. She left the stage to the first standing ovation of the evening, and came back with a sly grin on her face to pull "Mr. Zebra" and "London Girls" (from the British limited edition "Caught a Lite Sneeze" single) out of her bag. Caton came back onstage, and people started shouting requests: "Sugar," "Icicle," "Honey," "Professional Widow." Tori thought a moment and said, "Okay, while he's tuning I'll do this" and gave us "Icicle." At that point I thought, "nothing could make this show any more transcendent unless she played 'Honey' or something," not noticing that Caton had an acoustic guitar in his hand.

"Honey" is my absolute favorite Tori Amos song, even now. To hear it with the full musical accompaniment on acoustic guitar was absolute heaven, and reduced me to a quaking mess. When the song was done Tori turned to the harmonium, which her techies had expertly set up in place of the harpsichord behind her in the meantime, obviously ready to do "Hey Jupiter" again. Then she abruptly turned back and shooed Caton off the stage, who, surprised, shrugged and left with a smile and a wave for the enthusiastic audience. She started playing something on the harmonium that sounded eerily like bagpipes, and when she sang the first line of "Song For Eric" I, and everyone I was with, simply lost it. There she was, playing something that she had only rarely performed even when she and Eric Rosse were together, something no one expected her to ever perform in public again. The first time I saw her sing "Me And A Gun." not 10 feet in front of me at the Iron Horse Music Hall in Northampton, MA in early 1992 wasn't nearly as powerful as that.

Then it was over, yet another long, loud standing ovation and a few minutes to recover before making our way out, surrounded by people in a similar state who couldn't say anything that didn't start with something resembling "wow." Throughout the show the audience, who had been more raucous than the first crowd before the show began, had sat spellbound, caught by the magic that gave Tori Amos her reputation from the first and refused to disappear forever.

I know it would kill her, but Tori should do two shows a night more often. I don't know what it is about New Haven, but all of the shows of hers I've seen there have been something beyond words—that one in particular. I sincerely believe that performance was the best Tori show I have ever seen, and I hope as many other people as possible get to have a similar experience as the tour wears on. It takes something special to keep 1,500 people at breathless attention for an hour and a half and reduce many of them to tears by the end, and it's heartening to know that whatever that something is, Tori's still got it.

Happy Rhodes

Tin Angel (Philadelphia, PA), May 10th

Tori Amos

The Palace (New Haven, CT), May 11th
Virgin Megastore, May 13th

I balked at both the size of venue and price of tickets for Tori Amos' New York City peformances, and instead got tickets to see her in New Haven (as I had the two previous tours as well). It turned out that some of my friends I was going with were also going to see Happy Rhodes (a lesser-known singer in that same Tori Amos/Kate Bush/Sara McLachlan etc. category) in Philadelphia; since I'd rather liked the Happy Rhodes I'd heard and she seldom plays live, it seemed like a fun thing to make a weekend of it as my friends were. The Tin Angel is right up the street from Khyber Pass, where I've seen several previous Philly shows.

Happy Rhodes sometimes plays live with a full band, but on this occasion she had only a bassist and electric guitarist to accompany her own acoustic guitar. The electric guitar was heavy with effects (echo/delay, etc.), and there were some loop effects for background texture, but it was always subtle and appropriate. Rhodes' own guitar playing uses rather normal chords, but her strumming and plucking patterns were very tasty. And her voice is amazing: she has two very distinct registers, a high one that closely resembles Kate Bush, and a lower one which is quite individual. What most impressed me about the whole performance was its ease: she sang whatever notes she needed to without strain, played her guitar part fluently and relaxedly. And similar remarks apply to the two other musicians.

She did several songs from *Warpaint*, the one album I'd heard more than once, and that little edge of familiarity made them a hair more effective to me; similar was one of the two covers she did. The guitarist began playing an interesting texture which I first said to myself, Hendrix. Then it began sounding more like Fripp, especially when he began layering more guitar lines over it with delay. All this while Rhodes was talking about how much she admired the artist whose song she was about to do...Peter Gabriel, and the song was "Here Comes the Flood." Yow! And I realized that the version I'd heard most (though I hadn't heard it in a very long time) was the one on Robert Fripp's solo album *Exposure* with Gabriel singing to a plush Frippertronics texture. Rhodes' cover was very fine.

The curious thing about seeing this show was that I realized I was an infidel: everyone else there, certainly the people I knew, were intimately familiar with Rhodes' music, and for them this show and the Tori Amos show to follow the next night were very similar experiences, whereas for me they were completely different. They were in both cases (as I was only in one) deep inside the music, sensitive to every nuance of it; I was outside the bubble. I felt like a welcome visitor at a church not of my religion. I enjoyed the show quite a bit, but not as much as if I were more into the music.

The following day the expedition moved on to New Haven to see the Tori Amos show at the Palace. During the tumultuous applause that greeted her entrance, she played a rapid but nearly inaudible piano figure; she waited until the audience quieted down before beginning the prelude to *Boys for Pele*, "Beauty Queen."

And the spell was cast. There's something extraordinarily primal about that little song, that one anchoring piano note from which everlengthening strands of vocal melody exfoliate. Genuinely consciousness-altering; the first of a couple of truly extraordinary moments.

Then as on the album she went into "Horses." And though it was a good performance, there was something antsy about it: she fussed over details, pointing up some things, underplaying others, and the lovely flow of the song became fitful. At the time I put it down to first hearing a live performance of a song I knew well from the studio version.

To my considerable ennui she then did "Crucify." Most of her fans love this song, but I've heard it and heard it, and besides she does it really slowly at this point in her career, and it must last close to six minutes. I fidgeted. "This is only the second verse?" "She's still in the bridge?" But I endured.

The bravura "Precious Things" has been a live standout since her first tour, like a sturdy punchbowl that has lasted through many parties; but this time it slipped through her hands and shattered into fragments. It was practically deconstructed: it started extremely fast, and almost immediately lurched to a near-halt while she worried each bit like a separate scene to be performed. Most particularly the "every nice girl" line, where she habitually extends and growls the "grrrrrrl," bu this time turned it into (I'm not joking) a *30-second* grandstanding, almost electronic-sounding grinding vocal sound (with disorienting overbright light behind her). A startling stunt, to be sure, but musically egregious.

I was excited when she brought out Steve Caton, her guitar player since *Y Kant Tori Read*, and he played the mandolin opening to "Cornflake Girl" on acoustic guitar. It's my favorite *Under the Pink* song, but even this go-round without the rhythm track to hold her down she didn't do much more with the piano part than play it as recorded; I keep hoping to hear her stretch out and solo a bit. It was just too literal, besides not being particularly energetic.

The show troughed for a time at this point: "Doughnut Song" and "Putting the Damage On" from *BfP* sandwiched around "Pretty Good Year" from *UtP* were all nicely performed, but didn't excite me. "Happy Phantom" is another sprightly but well-worn *Little Earthquakes* tune, and "Not the Red Baron" is not the favorite *BfP* song.

But "Caught a Lite Sneeze" pretty much saved the show for me. Surprisingly, she didn't use a rhythm track, which I had thought essential to the song's appeal as the one real rocker on the new album; this transformed the song into almost a ballad with that rapid but harmonically slow harpsichord figuration. It worked very very well. She turned (a hair awkwardly) to the piano for the bridge, and as she hit the recap there came that moment which a friend had described to me so accurately (down to its emotional effect on him) and which I had therefore been waiting for...but *nothing could have prepared me* for actually experiencing it. She stopped playing the piano, and while continuing to sing "boys on my right side/boys on my left side" she began tapping out the rhythm with her knuckles, then hitting the high vocal note as she turned between microphones (the note still clearly audible) back to the harpsichord.

No verbal description, whether dry or evocative, can account for a moment like this; I'm getting chills now remembering it. The instant she stopped playing I went *somewhere else*, and it wasn't because I was waiting for and expecting it; the experience itself took me by surprise and transported me quite involuntarily. It just confirms my feeling that there is real magic in the world, that music is magic, and that Tori Amos is one of the most powerful magicians alive.

The rest of the song passed in a blur for me.

Back to earth for "Mother," another sturdy but unexciting old *LE* song, and then a disgracefully audience-interrupted version of "Me and a Gun," strong and quiet and disturbing as usual. End set.

The encore began with a lovely version of "Over the Rainbow," continued with a really fun, energetic version of the quirky "Space Dog" from *UtP* (Caton playing wah-wah guitar), and an OK version of yet another old *LE* track, "China" (though it's always nice to hear the extra vocal melisma she adds to the second half of the chorus).

And yet another encore: the version of "This Old Man" from the first single, and the great "Hey Jupiter" played on the harmonium. I don't really like it that way as much as I like the piano version, so the show as a whole ended on a low ebb.

I was really ambivalent about the show; disappointed in the set list (she did six *LE* songs, which seemed too many, and seven *BfP* songs, which seemed too few, plus four from *UtP*, which seemed about right), a bit disappointed with some of the performances and some of the rewriting, emotionally devastated by the moments that really worked. And physically tired from a long weekend. And so I made a really bad decision: I had the option of staying for the second show to follow, but I wasn't sure I was up to the experience (and it was a considerable extra expense). I took the train back to NYC. By the accounts of my friends who stayed (and who agreed that the first show was good but not that good), the second show was absolutely spectacular, with a *much* more interesting playlist. I'm still really upset about it.

Small recompense followed on Monday, though: Tori Amos was scheduled to do an in-store performance at the Virgin Megastore that just opened in Times Square.

I did everything right for this one: got up early and got to the store at 6 a.m. to get a wristband pass (I was among the first twenty people in line), went home and rested, went back to the store about 11:30 for the noon lineup. I hope the Megastore learns from their experience; the lineups were done at a small side door where there really wasn't room for the mob who showed up, and as you might imagine security's efforts to disperse the crowd until the official noon lineup were laughably ineffective: people moved down a few storefronts or across the street or behind trucks, and creeped up again when security went inside again. And everybody surged in a mob as soon as lineup was called. It was a very polite crowd; no angst, no violence; but nonetheless everybody *really wanted* to get inside as soon as possible, please. It was still a zoo. In the event, because of soundchecks, etc., it took them *an hour* to process people inside in an orderly fashion and down one or two floors (depending on armband color, some people had to stay on the balcony above the bottom-floor performance space) to the stage.

I was lucky enough to get about six layers of people from the stage, closer than I've been since the Toad's Place show in New Haven four years ago, and maybe closer than I'll ever get again. Tori Amos came out to the announcements of the radio DJ (the concert was broadcast live on the radio and to the other two U.S. megastores in L.A. and San Francisco), and played four songs: "Crucify" (yawn) "Silent All These Years" (double yawn; those are *LE*'s two most popular songs), "Cornflake Girl" (with Caton again; and again good but too literal), and (melt) "Hey Jupiter" (those being the best songs from *UtP* and *BfP* respectively), all on piano only. The radio guy did short interview bits between songs, and after the radio broadcast was officially over she fielded questions from the audience (including feeds from the other two cities): about creativity (where she talked about Neil Gaiman and how stories or songs came to visit them), about her hair dye, about the pictures in the new album's booklet. Favorite quote: one guy said that he couldn't figure out just why he liked her music so much (some woman from the balcony shouting out "Because you're a guy!"), and did she know why? Answer: "I don't know why I like guacamole so much. I mean, it's green, it looks like puke, but I love it."

It cost a bit of struggle and most of the day to get there, and it was relatively brief, but to get to see her perform from up that close was worth it.

classical performance

ST-X: Ensemble Xenakis USA
92nd St. Y, April 21st

Carnegie Mellon Orchestra
Carnegie Hall, April 23rd

This was the third (unless I missed one) concert by ST-X: Ensemble Xenakis USA, devoted to the works of Iannis Xenakis (1922-); unlike the first two, which were at Threadwaxing Space (a Soho gallery/performance space), this one was at the prestigious 92nd Street Y. The occasion was further graced by the presence of the composer.

Xenakis looks his age; he moves slowly, but seems in good shape. His English is decent, but not great; I suspect his comprehension lags behind his speaking ability, because during the rather disappointing interview he seemed to be slightly missing the point at several moments. The interview (by a local critic, with composer Lukas Foss sitting in) was pretty primerlike: "Mr. Xenakis, would you comment on your use of mathematics in your music?" Apart from the interesting insight that mathematics comes easy to him (not surprising but a point I'd not seen made before), nothing in the interview was new to anyone (raises hand) who's been reading about Xenakis for years. A few questions from the audience followed; Xenakis failed to rise to the bait and claimed that he was not in any sense a political composer, despite his political activities when younger (he was in the

French Resistance). The last question was, "What is your favorite piece of music?" and I think he surprised everyone by answering, quickly and firmly, "Brahms."

The concert (conducted by ensemble director Charles Zachary Bornstein) began with the North American premiere of *À la memoire de Witold Lutoslawski*, for two trumpets and two horns. The four instruments basically play steady, very close (i.e. maximally dissonant) harmony, with their attacks staggered in a sort of counterpoint; a fanfare-madrigal, if you will. It bears a resemblance to Carl Ruggles' *Angels*. It was so wonderfully intense that four minutes of it was about as much as I could stand.

Échange is about 7 years old, and is recorded on an Attacca CD, but this was its New York premiere. Basically a concerto for bass clarinet and ensemble, its solo part was played with great panache by Michael Lowenstern. The piece opens with the kind of overlapping drones Xenakis is so fond of; after a meditative cadenza, a passage of midtempo chorale, on rotations of a four-note motive, that much resembles Xenakis' teacher Messiaen. Then a more virtuoso cadenza, with multiphonics. The piece proceeds to develop and explore these varying textures for not quite fifteen minutes.

N'Shima, about the same length, is the one repeat from the ensemble's previous concert, and was the piece I liked least; but it was commissioned by an Israeli organization, sets a Hebrew text, and was played in memory of Rabin. Two sopranos chant one- or two-note melodies accompanied by short muted glissandos on horns and trombones (separately) and by a commenting cello in spidery rapid figuration.

After intermission came *Akrata*, a particular favorite of mine; in fact it was the Xenakis piece where I first "got" what he was up to. It's for 16 wind instruments, ranging from piccolo to contrabassoon (quite a sight watching the musicians bring this variety of strange-shaped instruments onstage). The basic strategy is pittering repeated notes which break out through the ensemble in raindroplike patterns; there are also the statutory overlapping drones; in the middle ground call&response exchanges of shorter sustained notes. It's a fascinating piece which, despite its lack of conventional rhythm and form, does not sound random. Its roughly ten minutes passed by all too quickly.

The finale, also about ten minutes, was Bornstein's orchestration of the Xenakis piano piece *Evryali* for the same 16 winds plus five strings. If nothing else it does a good job of turning the monochromatic piano sound into a very colorful texture. The toccattalike rhythms as running wind figures was particularly effective; I also liked the high, short piano notes as string pizzicato; and turning the pedaled low notes into brief drones seemed quite idiomatic.

As usual this ace ensemble played the excrutiatingly difficult music with aplomb, and it sounded just splendid. I wish they had the resources to play more often than once a year.

At the merchandise table in the lobby there were takeaway poster/booklets (sixfold down to 8x10) for a concert the following Tuesday at Carnegie Hall by the Carnegie Mellon Philharmonic; and on this whole huge thing there was (apart from "all-Xenakis program") no indication whatever of just what Xenakis pieces were going to be played. You would think that an institution as venerable as Carnegie Hall would be better organized; but there was even more to come. I called the contact number, and the person there didn't have the program information available. Since the ticket stub from Sunday gave the bearer $5 off the price of admission to the Carnegie Hall concert, I decided to go ahead and see. Got there just barely in time, and the ticket clerk didn't have the information either. So I bought a balcony ticket (which amounted to half-price, a fine bargain), rushed upstairs, grabbed a program and a seat, and the orchestra was actually tuning up by the time I opened the program and found out what was playing.

Furthermore, the concert began with two compositions (played as a single work) for 60-piece orchestra; it was followed by a piece for 6 percussionists, before which they cleared the entire stage of chairs and music stands, leaving only the six percussion stations. After the intermission was a piece for voice and 11 players, after which they had to set up the entire stage again for the finale, a piece for 100-player orchestra. The sub-intervals were nearly as long as the intermission.

But it was a good concert nonetheless. It began with *Metastasis* and *Pithoprakta*, Xenakis' first two big successes from the mid-50s. These pieces are the font from which the whole "soundscape" style of the late 50s sprang: Ligeti, Penderecki, etc. Huge string clusters and glissandi, massive brass interjections, pizzicato and knocking on the body of the strings as percussion patterns...you name it. The pieces still sound adventurous and innovative (despite how often they've been imitated). It had been a long time since I'd heard them—I've never replaced my LP version—and it was bracing to reencounter them. And they were very well played.

Persephassa for six percussionists was, like *Pleiades* (several times recorded), written for Les Percussions de Strasbourg; it's about half as long and about half as interesting. There were some fine effects, for example where each of the six players alternated three different sustained sounds, so that the sounds did The Wave chasing each other around the semicircle. But too much of it was portentous pauses followed by cacophonous battering. It was written in 1969 for performance at Persepolis.

Following intermission was *La Déese Athena* ("The goddess..."), about which I had dire expectations. Like *Kassandra*, which Xenakis wrote in 1987, this 1992 piece was written for falsetto baritone as an addition to his primitively ritualistic 1966 incidental music for the *Oresteia*. I found *Kassandra*, with its artificial high voice glissandos and other vocal effects, rather excruciating despite some interesting percussion and psalterion music. *Athena*, however, after I got over the startling sound of a baritone alternating his "normal" voice and a falsetto, rather like a conversation, I liked much better. Solo percussion cadenzas and wind chanting accompanied the largely single-note declaiming of the voice. Even without *Kassandra*'s acrobatics it must be a bear to sing, but Philip Larson managed it quite gracefully. I was relieved to enjoy the piece more than I expected.

The finale was a quite new (1994) work for full orchestra called *Dämmerschein* (unusually titled in German rather than Greek), and it shows that Xenakis has in no way lost it in his old age. It's almost all tone clusters, either narrow braids on single instrument families that play short melodic phrases—an extraordinary sound—or huge clouds of clusters that fade in and out of prominence in the various sections of the orchestra. Some of the rhythms are so complex, apparently, that conducter Juan Pablo Izquierdo needed three sub-conductors who were unobtrusively seated among the musicians. It's not a very long piece (between ten and fifteen minutes, I'd guess), but a very striking one. I'd love to have a recording of it.

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record reviews

TORI AMOS: *Boys for Pele* (Atlantic 82862-2)

And it's Torimania Chapter Three: new album, plethora of singles, magazine articles everywhere, nearly-constant TV and radio appearances, and a gargantuan tour.

The followup to her pair of previous platinum platters, *Boys for Pele* is more different from itself than the first two are from each other, if you take my meaning: a very rich album, with a great variety of songs, uptempo and downtempo, harpsichord and piano, confessional and not.

A bit of arithmetic. The album runs 70 minutes; thus it seems more ample than the previous two. But consider that it's a double LP (on vinyl), with each side introduced by a short song, and the album concludes with another (though that one actually runs three minutes). *Little Earthquakes* and *Under the Pink* each have twelve cuts and run just about exactly 57 minutes. If you take away those five intro cuts from *Pele* which run about 9 minutes total, you end up with thirteen cuts running 61 minutes... which, minus the shortest cut (not quite 4 minutes), comes to...12 cuts running 57 minutes. It's quite an illusion.

The structural strategy of this set of songs is to not differentiate much (i.e. change chord-sequences little if at all) between verses and choruses, and furthermore to repeat the first verse as the last verse, thus blurring the distinction even more. This also makes the bridges stand out in relief even more than they would; and as a group the bridges on this album are really excellent. It's a sign of a first-rate songwriter, I think, when the bridge is the part of the song you wait to hear. (This is true of quite a few Beatles songs, for example.)

"Beauty Queen" starts the album-journey in riveting fashion: a single piano note, insistently repeated, providing the drone for a slowly-building vocal line that starts with a little modal mordent (three-note flourish) and each time through gets a few notes longer and more substantial, resulting (like her earlier "Song for Eric") in a miniature perfect folksong.

The rapt mood set, the companion-piece "Horses" follows after the briefest pause. It instantly recalls the tinkling music-box arpeggios of the beloved "Winter," feeling though less nostalgic than fairytalelike. It begins with the chorus, and as if to mark it clearly from the verses (which have the same chords), she follows it with one of her heartstopping waterfall piano passages (cf. the instrumental bridge of "Winter," again).

I am somewhat at a loss to describe the extraordinary emotional effect of the bridge: after another briefer piano cascade, suddenly the almost rigid strophic chorus/verses give way to slightly wilder harmony and much freer phrasing, almost as though (to get fanciful) we are going further in, from mythic time to dreamtime. Then we *seem* to go back to the verse...but she nudges the harmony *just so* as she sings "But if there is a way to find you I will find you..."—and we're still in the bridge; but it's a more direct, real-time moment, gone so quickly (the second half of the phrase is back to the harmony of the verses) one wonders if one imagined it; almost as though one briefly woke from a dream then returned to it.

Though "Blood Roses" is another ballad, it provides a strong contrast: the ubiquitous piano is replaced, for the first time in her output, by bracing uptempo harpsichord figuration, in a kind of Baroque style; the pastoral atmosphere gives way to blood and sex imagery with a Gothic (vampiric?) edge. Another terrific bridge, its loud first part the first non-sotto voce on the album (which remains quiet on the whole, and this bridge continues to stand in relief); its second part suddenly drops to an inverse climax, an incredibly poignant interlude to which the return of the mezzo-forte intro sounds like a brusque interruption. But the poignancy continues to suffuse the shortened recapitulation, and despite a desperate "come on come on" in the coda the song ends quietly.

"Father Lucifer" goes back to a bouncy piano and a relaxed mood reminiscent of Eleanor Farjeon's English-countryside fantasies (maybe it's just that milkmaid). Again the bridge is marvelous: she seems to say, hey, I've got *three* bridges for this song; I know, I'll do *all three*—at the same time! And cue that "Penny Lane" trumpet please, thank you! It's an ecstatic, vertiginous passage.

"Professional Widow" continues the alternation by returning to rocked-up harpsichord. This is the most bravura song on the album: at least three people have noted its resemblance to Led Zeppelin (if you can imagine Zep harpsichord!). The chorus has one of those full-voiced siren passages that put off some people and galvanize others. The fourth strikingly successful bridge in a row comes out of nowhere (getting quieter again, and changing to triple time) yet exactly right, and the equally unlikely coda (also in triple time) is even more dead on, coming to the only loud ending on the album (and one of the few in her entire output).

An extraordinary first side.

"Mr. Zebra" introduces the second quaternary in her music-hall manner, jaunty horns and all. It's not my favorite style of hers but this is an irresistably cute example.

"Marianne" reportedly is one of her spontaneous compositions (like "Bells for Her" on *UtP*), composed as she was playing it. Unlike earlier examples, however (which tended to be single musical images), it is much more sectional and varied. It's structurally elusive if you try to listen to it as a song; on repeated exposure it comes clear that it is coherent, but through-composed: that is, though it has clear "verses" (more syllabic singing, slightly darker harmony) and "choruses" (longer held notes, brighter harmony), there's no repetition of parts: each section is different. There is one piano figure that occurs both in the middle (where it develops into a brief solo—cadenza?—which is interrupted by what is clearly a "bridge": repetitive rhythms, tension-building harmony) and at the end (where it constitutes a brief instrumental coda), but otherwise only a consistent mood of reflective melancholy holds it firmly together. There are some nicely restrained strings fleshing out the texture. It has emerged (despite the most opaque lyrics on the album, already much-quoted as bad examples) as one of the more remarkable songs on the album. It's very haunting, sitting in the mind while it's playing like a half-remembered song long unheard.

I was asked at one point if I could explain what "Caught a Lite Sneeze" (the album's first single) means, and I decided to indulge myself with a rather elaborate deconstruction.

Let's talk about the music first:

What "Caught A Lite Sneeze" Means To Me is first of all that blood-stirring electronic drumbeat (it's the one real rocker on the album) and those heart-clutching harpsichord arpeggios (note that the vocal comes in *45 seconds* after the opening of the song, a very daring move for a pop single), the way the verse flows directly into the chorus without transition, the nicely-done stop and start ("right on time") for the bridge

(which introduces piano temporarily), again flowing back into the verse almost imperceptibly, the keening Kate Bushlike backing vocals in the chorus, the also nicely-done dead stop at the end. I'll take all of this as having plenty of "meaning" for me.

"Caught a Lite Sneeze" belongs to a surprisingly large number of Tori Amos songs based around the chord-pair A minor and F (or transposition): other members of this family include "Girl" and "Precious Things" (and in part "Tear in Your Hand") from *Little Earthquakes*; "Baker Baker" and "Cornflake Girl" from *Under the Pink*; plus the b-side "Honey." (This is a rather common chord sequence, to be clear: for just two examples, Stevie Nicks' "Rhiannon"—to which "Girl" may owe a small debt—and the main theme of R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion," which Tori of course has covered.) "Girl" ("she's been everybody else's girl/maybe one day she'll be her own") and "Precious Things" (with its theme of her being judged for her piano playing, not her person) are lyrically relevant here.

(Consider also Neil Young's "Southern Man," which has the same *three*-chord sequence in its verses—Am-F-Dm or transposition; and consider how neatly "Lily Belle, your hair is golden brown/I've seen your black man coming round" would fit into this song—or the album as a whole.)

"Sneeze" is also a twin with "Cornflake Girl" (and *its UtP* twin "God") in having that big danceable rhythm track.

An even more intriguing twin is *UtP*'s "Past the Mission." In both songs we have short-of-breath staccato verses a little higher in her register, and flowing choruses a little lower in her register. And note the interesting difference that in "Past the Mission" the chorus has a *male* backing vocal (Trent Reznor) an octave *below* the main vocal, whereas "Caught a Lite Sneeze" has *female* backing vocals an octave *above* the main vocal.

Did Tori Amos have any of these correspondences in mind when she wrote the song? Almost certainly not; she works by intuition. Did I have them in mind when I was first listening to the song? No; but they occurred to me very quickly when I started thinking seriously about the song. Are these correspondences meaningful? Since I subscribe to Deryck Cooke's theory (in his magisterial *The Language of Music*) that musicians tend to use the same bits of musical vocabulary to express the same emotions, that's exactly what I'm arguing. I got the subliminal sense that the song was "about" the same things as "Girl" or "Precious Things" or "Past the Mission" because the resonances of the harmony and the rhythms gave me the same kinds of feelings.

Now the lyrics:

caught a lite sneeze

[When asked about the song in a radio interview, Tori said, "The guy was malaria." So I interpret this line as saying, I could have caught a "disease"—a really bad relationship—with him, but I got off easy.]

caught a lite breeze...

[I'm chalking this up mostly to glossolalia and word association, but it reinforces the ephemerality of the relationship.]

boys on my left side...

[Into the valley of death (love? *Liebestod*?) rode Tori Amos...]

and you're not here

[This couldn't be clearer: longing for a lover not present. The phrase seems to me the real emotional center of the song. In combination with the previous line, it could be paraphrased "There are men all around me, but not the one I want."]

I need a big loan ...

[Tori has been talking in interviews about how she has spent her whole life getting approval from men, and how she is trying now to reclaim her feminine aspects and gain confidence internally. This seems to be a metaphorical expression of this idea.]

buildings tumbling down...

[She thought there was more to the relationship than there was, and it collapsed. I kept hearing "buildings tumbling down" as "beauty can't believe" which seemed to make sense too: "it looked so good, I couldn't believe it was so fragile."]

... just bring your son

[In a British interview she spoke about how after she and longtime partner Eric Rosse broke up she degraded herself casting about for a replacement, on the rebound, concluding with the phrase "bring your son." So that's what this must mean—no idea who Mr. St. John is.]

the spire is hot ...

[perhaps a very odd sexual metaphor? He was ardent and she wasn't?]

...Belle dragging your foots

[again a guess: whoever this guy was had a wife or another lover]

I'm hiding it well...

[trying to suppress her sexual urges as she was taught by her religious upbringing? I'm not sure she's using "Sister" in that sense here, though.]

...Belle dragging my foots

[could be either her own past, or his other lover, is making her reluctant]

...you get closer...

[Again it sounds like he was pursuing the relationship more strongly than she was.]

use that fame

[She has talked frankly about playing groupie—even after she was herself famous.]

rent your wife and kids ...

[Did this guy dissemble about being married? Was the state of his marriage doubtful?]

...dreamed a little dream

[She had fantasies about the guy but came to her senses—"Dream a Little Dream of Me"]

made my own pretty hate machine

[This seems real clear to me: in one phrase it says "I degraded myself and filled myself with the same degree of self-loathing as is expressed on that album."]

boys in their dresses

[She has talked in a few interviews about friendships with gay men, and there's the lyric in "Blood Roses"—*I think you're a queer*—and the one in "Hey Jupiter"—*are you gay, are you blue* (though this one is nicely ambiguous and could well simply be using the old meaning of "gay")— so I'm assuming that some of the songs—and this reference—are about those friends.]

So what do the lyrics mean? She was tempted to have an affair with a famous man, who may or may not have had a viable marriage; though she had given in to her sexual impulses in other situations, she stopped short of it in this one.

Is the song about Trent Reznor (remembering the correspondence to "Past the Mission")? That's a very plausible interpretation; but that gets into a kind of celebrity-mongering biographical criticism that I'm not very interested in (and it isn't my business). It doesn't much matter who it was for the song to be effective.

In the end, despite some lacunæ, the song seems fairly coherent; still, I'd argue that none of this matters all that much, that the song (as I said when I started) is "meaningful" to me purely on the basis of the music.

"Muhammad My Friend" is a favorite of some listeners, it's only fair to point out, so my lukewarm reaction may underrate it. Despite a good improvised intro, neither its repetitive, largely accompanimental piano part nor its plain vocal melody strike my ear. It does have interesting religion-guying lyrics and a tasty soprano sax obbligato, but for me it

seems a bit monotonous.

"Hey Jupiter" however is an absolutely archetypal Tori Amos song, squarely in her confessional mode. It's another sign of a really fine songwriter to come up with something this typical and yet genuinely new. It uses only four chords, their roots in scale order: the tonic major, two minor chords a step up each, and a major chord on the subdominant. The slow progress of the short verse and the long sectional chorus (which flow together in the usual strategy of the album) is a stately waveform, up two steps, back one step, up two more steps and back one. The twice-repeated climactic wordless bridge (resembling, as several obsevers have noted, the coda of Prince's "Purple Rain," which Amos has covered) hopscotches the chord sequence in a different order. It shares this simplicity and unadorned piano part with its closest cousin "Baker Baker" (the most underrated *UtP* song), but where the latter portrays a mood of slightly cool, reflective—but still plangent—regret, "Hey Jupiter" is set in abject misery, that moment (to paraphrase the artist herself) of crawling across the floor to a phone which is not ringing; it verbalizes most eloquently the subtext of the album, Amos' breakup, and rises to a pitch of feeling seldom matched even in her highly emotional work. "Baker Baker" is most affecting largely by indirection; "Hey Jupiter" is larger, more intense, deeper-cutting; in short, a powerhouse.

I can't better Tom Doyle's summation from *Q* magazine: "If any song is to sturdily reinforce her repertoire and endure the passing of time, it is 'Hey Jupiter.'" It's right up there with "Winter" and "Here. in my Head" among the finest songs she's ever written.

"Way Down" occupies the album's midpoint with another brief, this time soulful interlude with a *perfect* gospel-chorus coda.

"Little Amsterdam" is dominated by a down&dirty two-bar blues vamp (tonic chord, two passing chords). Though there are "phantom" verses and choruses, this is really a passacaglia, a series of variations over the obstinate bassline, which is interrupted only briefly three times by what corresponds to the dominant "turn" in a 12-bar blues. As the song goes on piano line gets busier, the vocal line more agitated, the texture more thickened with added instruments and backing vocals, and it maintains a brooding intensity (governed by that inexorable vamp) which makes it (with "Hey Jupiter") my other favorite on the album.

"Talula" seemed kind of like the harpsichord twin of "Marianne," with another wayward structure; it took me a long time to realize it has verses and choruses with the same accompaniment (as per the rest of the album), a short early bridge, and a longer later bridge. Like the other harpsichord songs it's high-energy, but the extra instruments seem to make clutter this time around, and it's one of the songs I like least.

"Not the Red Baron" has lovely smooth persistent piano chording, a couple of beautiful musical/lyrical lines (especially the final "prettiest red ribbons"), but like "Muhammad" I find it a bit monotonous and also not among the better songs on the album.

"Agent Orange," the short intro to the home stretch, is insinuatingly chromatic to an annoying degree. Music-hall again, and not as cute.

"Doughnut Song" begins almost like a nursery rhyme, in the higher register of both piano and voice; but immediately the chorus in the stronger midde register comes out with "and if I'm wasting all your time," and reveals that this is no mere ditty. In fact it's the emotional turning point of the album: the plaintive first chorus gradually and subtly transmogrifies into the final chorus' "you've been wasting all my time" before reprising the first verse, which is both the same and not the same after the experience of the song in between. It's another emotional powerhouse.

Though "In the Springtime of His Voodoo" closely resembles "Little Amsterdam" (insistent piano riffing, Southern Gothic atmosphere) and has my favorite line on the album (the Eagles reference), it's another nonfavorite; it does have another fine harpsichord-dominated bridge, but its jumping, jazzy 6/8 is a style that doesn't do a whole lot for me.

"Putting the Damage On" has lovely brass accompaniment from the Black Dyke Mills Band reminiscent of both Richard Thompson's "I Still Dream" and the similarly finale-esque "When an Old Cricketer Leaves the Crease" by Roy Harper. It functions as the summation of the album, a recollection in tranquility of both the musical and emotional threads that have gone before. It succeeds in regaining the equilibrium of "Baker Baker" (which "Hey Jupiter" had musically reached for and emotionally fallen short of); its verse and the first half of its two-part chorus are as usual undifferentiated, and though the harmony keeps promising to resolve the single repeated phrase, it seems in no hurry to do so—but when it does it is firmly and without fuss. The second half of the chorus is wordless, harking back to "Hey Jupiter" as if to say the pain is still there but it's under control now; the false bridge which becomes next verse (regaining the repeated phrase) recalls the feint in "Horses"; the true bridge ("I'm trying not to move") following the second chorus is a similar emotional rally back to the hard-earned calm resignation. It's the third emotional powerhouse.

And the real end of the album; there remains only the coda "Twinkle" which balances the prelude "Beauty Queen" with nearly as spare a piano part and rounds things off like the dot on the i.

It's a sturdy structure: the best pieces are at the beginning ("Beauty Queen" and "Horses"), end ("Putting the Damage On" and "Twinkle"), and middle ("Hey Jupiter" and "Little Amsterdam"); and even though for this listener the album goes a touch slack in the late middle, the strategically-placed "Doughnut Song" bridges the gap. The sequencing evokes an impression of progress that makes the album seem like a connected—though largely intuitive—narrative, and though I quickly began listening selectively to the previous two albums (which seem more like collections), this one I have mostly listened to as a single work, only seldom consulting it for individual songs.

This is one reason why *Boys for Pele* has been a stumbling-block for the casual Tori Amos fan; it seems to respond much better to the fanatic's playing it several times a day for weeks (and has not worn out its welcome after many, many plays on my CD player), and not nearly so well to a more normal few listens a month. I make bold to offer this Guide to the Perplexed: listen to "Hey Jupiter," "Doughnut Song," and "Putting the Damage On" (in that order) as a trilogy; not only are they the tracks that anyone who likes her previous work is likely to respond to the most readily, but they form the core of the album's emotional argument (from despair to sorting-out to resignation). Once familiar with them, one might add one or two of the other tracks each time through.

Boys for Pele may well be Tori Amos' best album yet, and it has proved, to me anyway, to be well worth the trouble of getting to know it.

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ELYSIAN FIELDS

(Radioactive RARD-11402) [CD EP]

I first heard Elysian Fields in a record store; it was Jennifer Charles' voice that caught my ear. It's one of Those Voices: a little like Hope Sandoval of Mazzy Star (particularly its expressively sliding off the pitch), a little like Margot Timmins of Cowboy Junkies (particularly the emphasis on its lower, breathier register), a little like Astrud Gilberto of "Girl from Ipanema" fame (particularly its bell-like upper register notes and jazzy inflections). I asked the clerk if I could look at the CD, and was startled to discover that it was produced by Oren Bloedow and Ed Pastorini, whom I had first discovered on the *Thirsty Ears* compilation of avant-rock; I've been following their various bands around the last six months or so. Pastorini plays keyboards and guitar in Church of Betty, and leads his own group 101 Crustaceans; Bloedow plays bass in 101 Crustaceans and leads *his* own group. In Elysian Fields Pastorini plays piano and a little guitar, Bloedow plays guitar, and there is also a standup bass and a drummer using brushes. It's kind of a Lower East Side version of Grenadine (the Jenny Toomey/Mark Robinson "indie lounge music" group): it has the feel of 50s/60s jazz-pop, though giving extra emphasis to the chromaticism already inherent in the style. It seems very accessible to me, with enough oddness to the harmony to keep my interest, and if nothing else one can just listen to that exceptional voice.

I've played this 4-song EP (which costs $6 new, not too bad a price for 18 minutes; equivalent to $15 for 45 minutes) a lot. The opener, "Star," has more of a (soft) rock beat than the others, with the most catchy melody and some nice chromatic riffs going in opposite directions in the accompaniment. Excellent rolling-arpeggio piano solo from Pastorini. "Diamonds All Day" in a way is the most Mazzy Star-like, quiet triple-time acoustic picking with electric guitar accents and effective contrast between the sotto voce low verses and the more ringing (but still quiet) chorus. Suave oboe/english horn obbligatos and a fine, fine tasteful guitar solo by Mark Ribot. "Move Me" is based on an electric guitar line that goes chromatically down, then chromatically up, over a quietly inexorable acoustic guitar rhythm. "Get Rich" is the one Pastorini composition (the other three are by Bloedow and Charles), and it sounds it: a little nervous and uneasy, with a nasty little guitar riff over a syncopated bassline. Pastorini sings alternating verses. An excellent appetizer for the full album to follow in the next few months.

POLVO: *Exploded Drawing*

(Touch and Go TG162CD)

This is an experiment. I'm listening to Polvo's brand new third album (they also have three EPs)—their debut on Touch and Go records—for the first time as I write this.

"Fast Canoe": Oh, #*&*%! One of those incredibly dissonant, bendy guitar riffs Ash Bowie and Dave Brylawski are so good at, with a little chromatic tail. Perfect start. Then some slightly normal chords, and both guitarists doing less complex versions of the riff before the riff itself returns. The vocals go over the normal chords, with a nagging repeated chord as chorus. The song resembles one of their best, "Every Holy Shroud." Tingly little licks alternate with the chord for a sort of bridge or development section. Tension-building new section of voice over repeated guitar figure alternating with big chord. The chorus with a new repeated lick over it repeats relentlessly to the fadeout.

A crashing dissonant chord arising from the previous ashes introduces "Bridesmaid's Blues," which changes quickly into one of their faster, upbeat songs, and one of their more normal ones. Interesting coda of widely-spaced single guitar chords over rolling gong sounds.

"Feather of Foregiveness" starts with another stingingly dissonant repeated chord under vocals. The second strain is more syncopated. Different syncopated chords with a wailing glissando over top for an instrumental break. Another long repeating coda (with a brief last vocal chorus).

Fade in to "Passive Attack," a brief instrumental with koto-style plucked sounds, which fades out again.

"Light of the Moon" permits us to observe what Polvo covering "Happy Trails" might sound like: a very similar figure (dissonantly modulated) is its basis. Weirdly disorienting in the usual Polvo manner.

"Crumbling Down" has a very fast pulse on one guitar, and chords in a completely different key on the other. After some stops and starts in comes the vocal. One more slightly less odd bridge section, and that's the song.

The intro to "Street Knowledge" sounds like hammer dulcimer; the song, slightly fast tempo, is the most normal one yet. It fades out under more hammer dulcimer.

"High-Wire Moves" is another very fast, driving one. Slightly dissonant chords. Nice slowdown for the title chorus. The next two sections hold that midtempo, with tasty *almost* normal chords. Then the speed is gradually and deftly increased back to the original tempo for a recap; the coda is the slowest part of the song.

Electronic keyboard noise fades in to introduce "Monoloth." Curly little revolving guitar lick in their usual swell style enters. Punctuating hugely dissonant chord from the other guitar. Back to just the one guitar, which fades out.

"In This Life" has a fairly standard chord sequence, but with Polvo bends. A brief instrumental break alternating astringent guitar figures and heavy chords. The instrumental break, a bit extended, hits a repeated passage to fade out at the end. Sleigh bells remain and slow to a tremolo, holding through to...

...the slightly Asian-sounding beginning guitar riff of "The Secret's Secret." The set of chords that follow is meltingly bitonal. That's all there is.

"Snowstorm in Iowa" unusually begins with a rapid bassline. Even wilder bends than usual on guitars accompany urgent vocals. One guitar turns to chords in sync with the bass in the chorus. Another battle of syncopated guitar chords goes through a series of metamorphoses...and the vocals never return.

Dissonant but rhythmically regular chords set the pace in "The Purple Bear." A typical interrupting figure turns up. The chorus, with a different interruption, is all over one chord. A variation on the main chords (with even more insistent interruptions), then clashing guitar figures for a bridge. Dead stop at the end.

Guitar figure in 6/8 accompanies entering vocal and punctuating chords in "Taste of Your Mind." Guitars switch roles with new figures for chorus. Cool unaccompanied guitar solo varying the main riff goes back into it for a recapitulation. Unusually, more repeats of the chorus form the coda.

Electronic percussion noises on one guitar; a repeated two notes on the bass; slidy choked figures on the other guitar; "Missing Receipts" has begun. The noise guitar takes up a fuzzing, sustained modal melody line, then gradually changes back to noise. Fadeout.

Normal chord arpeggio slid up dissonantly to another chord on one guitar is punctuated by a loud chord on the other guitar; this is the finale, "When Will You Die for the Last Time in My Dreams?" The vocals are over those strange normal/abnormal chords. Slow, stately progress. Fuzzed but normal

chords for the screamed chorus. Brief vocal bridge over similar chords, then the guitar goes into a development section based first on the chorus chords, then (unaccompanied) on the verse chords. After a recap, the guitar breaks out into a wild tremolo-strummed solo with vocal obbligato over the chorus chords to a raucous fadeout...which fades back in before it goes very far. Clean break into a repeated note on one guitar, while the other guitar plays a series of notes against it. It's a one-note guitar war! Then they cooperate in a nicely dissonant chord sequence before going back to clashing, for a six-minute coda to a six-minute song.

Overall first impression? I enjoyed every minute of it; I liked some of it a lot, and I'll be glad of the opportunity to hear it again. I suspect anyone who likes Polvo already will like this, too. I could come back later and add a paragraph about how it compares to their previous work...but that would Heisenberg this little experiment, and I think I'll just stop here.

SLEATER-KINNEY (Chainsaw CHSW12)
SLEATER-KINNEY: *Call the Doctor* (Chainsaw CHSW13)
EXCUSE 17 (Chainsaw CHSW 9)
EXCUSE 17: *Such Friends Are Dangerous* (Kill Rock Stars KRS-237)
HEAVENS TO BETSY: *Calculated* (Kill Rock Stars KRS-222)

Sleater-Kinney rules.

A three-woman band (2guitar& drums, no bass) from Olympia, home of somewhat better-known bands like Bikini Kill and Team Dresch, Sleater-Kinney is my discovery of the year so far. They're one of the angriest bands I've heard in a while—their emotional temperature is very similar to Hole or *Rid of Me*-era PJ Harvey. Their instrumental texture is stark, simple but imaginative guitar interplay (over driving drums) somewhat similar to early Raincoats or Slant 6.

Each of the guitar players comes from a previous band: Corin Tucker from Heavens to Betsy, and Carrie Brownstein from Excuse 17. It's kind of scary to listen chronologically and follow their artistic growth. The first, eponymous Excuse 17 album is so dimly recorded that it's difficult to tell whether rudimentary songwriting, beginner's chops, or the sound itself is responsible for the impression of monotony it leaves. The band were probably still teenagers when they recorded it, though, and improved very quickly. *Such Friends Are Dangerous*, though not much better sonically, is much stronger: it jumps out of the speakers with memorably obsessive riffs, particularly the slow, grinding "This Is Not Your Wedding Song" and the distorted harmonics of "She Wants 3-D."

Corin Tucker is a couple years older than Carrie Brownstein, and hit her stride right off the bat. There is a constant edginess to Heavens to Betsy's *Calculated* that, on the slower, slightly plodding tracks, calls to mind gloom-period Cure (imagine Corin Tucker singing "Siamese Twins"!), without the whining; the faster, relentlessly rhythmic ones are reminiscent of early Throwing Muses. Tucker means business lyrically, and entirely justifies titles like "Nothing Can Stop Me," "Waitress Hell," and "Stay Away." *Calculated*, like *Such Friends Are Dangerous*, is a fine album by any measure.

At each stage Tucker and Brownstein seem to have given up an iota of raw expressionism for an iota of craft (and by craft I don't mean technical ability, nor conventionality); this is evident as well in the difference between the Sleater-Kinney EP and full-length. The endpoint to date is an album of still-shocking intensity and formidable musicianship; and the sky's the limit as far as potential future development.

"Don't Think You Wanna," which opens the EP, begins with the two guitars playing midtempo clashing riffs that are dissonant both in themselves and to each other. Tucker's lead vocal is chanting and tuneless but nagging; in the second strain it rises to a high and hectoring pitch (very similar to Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex); over the strong backbeat and barre chords of the chorus the vocal grows desperately insistent—it's an extremely rousing effect. Two repetitions and a third verse, and the song is over after less than two minutes. "The Day I Went Away" follows with less edgy chording and introduces the calmer, less strident vocal of Brownstein; Tucker adds distant octave unisons on the second half of each line, like the inner echo of the outward deceptive calm, and takes over as the chorus halves and syncopates the rhythm. There's a quiet ominousness that continues the mood of the first song.

Then "A Real Man": fast choppy chords, breathlessly furious Tucker vocals, a shriek of "I don't wanna!" initiating another headlong chorus with another searing one-note Tucker vocal. A minute, and it's over. A miniature masterpiece.

The Sleater-Kinney *modus operandi* in place, the EP continues for another four fine tracks, then changes up a little for three slower, warmer, more major-key songs, with regret replacing anger as the chief emotion. "Lora's Song," the one vocal by the now-departed drummer, is perfectly, deliciously bitonal. And the finale, "The Last Song," is quiet (Brownstein on vocal again) but bitter, no less powerful in its emotional effect: it builds to a very striking scream, after an effective speedup and slowdown. Along with "A Real Man," it's the other outstanding song on a first-rate EP.

Call the Doctor took my ear a little while to catch up with the EP, but it's no letup; again, the title song commences the action with dissonant guitar riffs, a wonderful chorus where Tucker and Brownstein harmonize sourly over dropped-out beats, and a whipped-up bridge. "Hubcap" opens very oddly with ticking drums, one offangle chord, and peculiar vocal harmonies before the beat comes back. "Stay Where You Are," an especial highlight, has Tucker's staccato low guitar against Brownstein's smoother (but still edgy) high guitar—an electrifying sound—with Tucker singing harmony to the pitches of her guitar, followed by Brownstein singing an unusually hooky chorus. "I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone" is more upbeat, obviously the "single" (if there is one), though fiercely desirous rather than exuberant. "Taking Me Home" has kind of bluesy harmony over a triple beat. The surprisingly pretty pattering guitars at the outset of "Taste Test" (which contrast strongly with the stiff, broken-up vocals and typically downbeat lyrics) develop in the instrumental bridge into meltingly beautiful (but still pattering) half-as-fast chording.

My current favorite, though, is the penultimate "I'm Not Waiting." The opening guitar figure—two-note chords shifting very slightly and harmony-grindingly against one another—is throat-clutchingly intense: an amazing effect considering the simplicity of its means. And they wind it even tighter in the chorus—how do they *do* that? (A Tucker vocal as good as any on the album is part of it.) Add a nagging bridge to briefly interrupt and another gem is complete.

As on the EP, the finale "Heart Attack" is wistful rather than angry—though it too ends not with a whimper but a scream. (The one place where *Call the Doctor* falls short of its predecessor is that this one quiet song is not quite as good as the three on the EP.)

One of the most remarkable things about the Sleater-Kinney album, incidentally, is that it's gotten the reviewers so excited (me too) that every review I've read has been unusually well-written and impassioned. And nearly every one uses a phrase on the order of "best album of the

year." It's not just me.

VERUCA SALT: *Blow It Out Your Ass, It's....* (Geffen GED 22212)

Just as I had been wondering idly for the previous month or so what was up with Veruca Salt, along comes this new 19-minute, 4-song EP (two each by the two female singer/writer/guitarists) with its remarkably truculent title (in nice script type). The cover features the band garbed in what looks like toilet paper: the two guys buried in it, the two women strategically draped, kind of cheesecakey, but with a defiant attitude.

Like a band with something to prove.

There's something about Veruca Salt that sticks in people's craws, and I've never understood it. So OK, they're privileged young white suburban women of modest (but real) talent who got an early career break. The rancor (often masquerading as condescension) they've been greeted with seems out of proportion to their "offense." And the two potted opinions one hears about them, "they were signed too early" and "they'll never develop any further," sometimes from the same observers, have always seemed a bit contradictory to me.

I hope *I* haven't sounded condescending so far, because I'm on the band's side: I thought their debut, *American Thighs*, was a pretty good album, with two outstanding tracks ("Wolf" and "25"), a few good pop singles ("Seether," "Number One Blind"), and nothing that prevented me from listening to the album straight through with some frequency and quite a bit of enjoyment.

I'm also feeling a little smug because I won a bet with myself. Partly because I liked them the best, I had an intuition that "Wolf" and "25" (both of which showed an ability to build dramatic tension through repetition of slow rock riffing) represented a direction—opposite from making the perfect pop single (which cynicism about their commerciality would expect)—the band could develop.

And that appears to be exactly what happened.

This new EP begins with about 15 seconds of rather ugly feedback (as I say, truculent) introducing a grungy, slightly dark (but bouncy) guitar riff. If there's a single on the EP "Shimmer Like a Girl" is it; but though it has a sort of hook in the chorus, it's buried in the riff; this is not a pop song. The brief bridge is marked by a scream from one of the singers over a slight change of chords; they change back to the main riff, but we're still in the bridge, because the voices build tension with a very nice piece of counterpoint before releasing back into the chorus.

After the song ends on hammered chords, the band introduce themselves as though for a radio spot, then say, "And you're listening to *Blow It Out Your Ass*." *WHAM* in comes another bouncy/grungy riff. Though written by the other guitarist, "I'm Taking Europe With Me" is very similar to "Glimmer": near-hook in the chorus, highlighted vocal harmonies (and a bit of yelling) in the bridge; this one however comes to a quiet end after a dying-fall coda.

"New York Mining Disaster 1996" is a near-clone of "Wolf," attempting to make a song out of a slow repeated chord sequence. It's not as successful; there really are no signposts to distinguish verses from choruses from bridges, and it doesn't build to a climax the way "Wolf" does so spectacularly. Still, it avoids monotony—but barely.

The finale "Disinherit" is a twin of "25" (the one of the *American Thighs* pair that barely avoided monotony), but this time it surpasses its model: it's built on a quite complex little dissonant riff which changes slightly over the course of the song, against which the other guitar plays simple lead licks which tend to add even more dissonance. I find it quite delicious, and though the song lasts six minutes (easily the longest on the EP), and is only interrupted in its middle third for a dramatic buildup on one crunchy chord (with a passing chord a tritone away) underpinning a harmonized chant, it could have been longer as far as I'm concerned. The fadeout features the bass carrying the riff, one guitar playing a feedback sustained note, and the other guitar playing a repeated short phrase which stops half a step under; again, nice dissonance. Despite a very simple ABA structure, it's the best track on the EP and one of the better songs they've done.

Given how much time I've spent these last few weeks listening to Sleater-Kinney (who are in their early twenties, I gather), it's inevitable that I would compare them to Veruca Salt (who I believe are in their late twenties): two fairly new bands each led by a pair of female singer/writer/guitarists. And there's no question in my mind that Sleater-Kinney is much more talented, and more original, than Veruca Salt. But so what; I'm going to stop short of drawing obvious but invidious conclusions. Veruca Salt does have talent, they're working hard at their music and taking it seriously, and they deserve to be taken seriously themselves.

I fear, however, that the in-your-face Attitude of this release is likely to backfire, seem like defensiveness, bravado, and lack of self-confidence, and provoke even more derision from their detractors. But this converted they're preaching to would like to convey them this message: You don't, and didn't, have anything to prove to me. Good work.

VOLAPÜK: *Le feu de tigre* (Cuneiform RUNE 74)

I was a language geek when I was a teenager. Went from codes and ciphers to alphabets to grammars...eventually I could identify any Indo-European language (and quite a few others) on sight. Took an interest in universal languages, too, and learned Esperanto—no difficult task, to be sure.

So when I read about a band called Volapük (one of the other major universal languages; its rather Germanic word-compactor nature can be gleaned by the fact that the name means "world-speech"), and further that they are one of those Francophone progressive-rock bands (like my old fave Univers Zero) on Cuneiform (the label that rereleased Univers Zero and a lot of other similar music), and that their instrumentation was bass clarinet, cello, and drums...well, I was doomed.

Unlike most other bands of this kind, who tend to focus on 10 minutes, plus or minus, as the ideal length for their compositions, the longest cut here fails to reach six minutes, and it's more than a minute longer than anything else on the disc. Most of the music is in the nervous, uneven rhythms and dissonant polymodality also characteristic of Univers Zero, which ultimately goes back to Stravinsky and Bartók. The trio is pretty equilateral: it isn't necessarily the drums that carry the rhythm, and any two (or all three) of the instruments are liable to phrase together. Only one cut, "Coca Cola," has vocals; and since those are bizarre English sung in a heavy French accent, perhaps that's just as well.

As the saying goes, if you like this kind of music this is the kind of music you'll like. For my taste, there's never been enough of this sort around, and I'm quite happy with it indeed.

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